

NOVEL
2



Irina

The Vampire Cosmonaut

WRITTEN BY Keisuke Makino

ILLUSTRATED BY KAREI



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Vampire
Cosmonaut

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LYUDMILA KHARLOVA

"The vampire
Irina Luminesk.
What a wonderful
ingredient...
One that could
be poison or a
cure. We should
carefully consider
just what sort of
meal we want her
to be part of."

"There's no
doubt that
the Mehta
Project is a
more powerful
weapon
than nuclear
missiles."

FYODOR GERGIEV



“Is that really
what the moon
looks like?”

“It’s how the
moviemakers
imagine it.
Nobody has ever
actually seen it.”

As she gripped the popcorn tight in her hand, Irina’s eyes sparkled with childlike innocence. Seeing it reminded Lev of feelings he’d forgotten. He remembered how excited he was the first time he saw an encyclopedia of astronomy, the joy of drawing rockets he designed by himself for trips into space, and what it was like watching a movie for the first time.



The music drowned out Irina's voice. She ran, ice cream still in hand, her body acting of its own accord. She didn't even think about what to say. Just as she reached the fence, a figure in black blocked her path.



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Луна, Лайка и Носферату

Irina

The
Vampire
Cosmonaut

NOVEL

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Keisuke Makino

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Seven Seas Entertainment



Characters

Луна, Лайка и Носферату

- **LEV LEPS:** 21 years old. Cosmonaut candidate. Assisted in the Nosferatu Project.
- **IRINA LUMINESK:** 17 years old. Vampire. Nosferatu Project test subject.
- **MIKHAIL YASHIN:** 25 years old. Air force private second class. Top of the class among the cosmonaut candidates.
- **ROZA PLEVITSKAYA:** 22 years old. Air force private second class. Cosmonaut candidate.

- **SLAVA KOROVIN:** Rocket development chief.
- **DR. MOZHAYSKY:** Somatologist. Plant and animal experiment supervisor.
- **ANYA SIMONYAN:** Irina's data analyst.
- **LT. GEN. VIKTOR:** Cosmonaut-candidate instructor.
- **NATALIA:** Dorm matron.

- **VICE-DIRECTOR SAGALEVICH:** Cosmonaut Training Center vice-director.

- **FIRST SECRETARY FYODOR GERGIEV:** Supreme Leader of the Union of Zirnitra Socialist Republics.

- **LYUDMILA KHARLOVA:** Gergiev's press secretary and confidant.



[This story is fictional. All characters, organizations, and names are fictitious and have no relation to existing people.]

TSUKI TO LAICA TO NOSFERATU Vol. 2

by Keisuke MAKINO

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Illustration by KAREI

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TRANSLATION: Hengtee Lim

COVER DESIGN: H. Qi

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Rebecca Schneidereit

PROOFREADER: Jade Gardner

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: T. Anne

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Jules Valera

PRINT MANAGER: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein

PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

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Prelude: прелюдия

Black Dragon's Eyes

• очи цирнитра •

DECEMBER 12, the day Irina flew through space. In a meeting room of the Sangrad headquarters of the secret police—a group known as the Delivery Crew—an operative stationed at the Albinar Cosmodrome reported to the chairman and top brass via radio.

“Irina Luminesk has made a safe return.”

Applause and cheers could be heard in the control room on the other end of the radio, but there wasn't a single smile upon the faces of the Delivery Crew leadership. The chairman's brow creased as he frowned. His words were cold and emotionless.

“When she is no longer useful, ensure she is disposed of.”

The atmosphere in the room was heavy, still stained with a time in which human rights were trampled underfoot. A time of countless purges.

Anything that inconveniences the motherland will be erased.

Those who wore the badges of the secret police carried out their duties loyally and without question. They had little in the way of sympathy, even for their fellow man. And if their target was not a human but a test subject? One of the Nosferatu? Their work was even more straightforward.

Only recently, a young man and woman had been discovered as spies for the United Kingdom of Arnack. They were dragged to a basement, interrogated, and tortured.

No one knew what became of them.

Chapter 1:

The Nosferatu Project, Mission Complete

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

AT LONG LAST, the cold breath of Moroz ceased its whipping winds, and a vibrant white light spilled from between the clouds. A fine snow danced upon the Palma Plains as the Union's rescue vehicle kicked up dust, speeding toward the Albinar Cosmodrome. Inside the vehicle, a medic looked at Lev and Irina, who'd just been rescued from the freezing, snowy plains.

Lev sat on the simple bed as the medic attended to his injured knee. The bleeding had stopped, but his knee was swollen, and it still pulsed with pain.

"Ow..."

"You've got very bad bruising, and you might be looking at bone damage. Make sure to get it properly checked out."

Lev nodded weakly as the medic handed him some crutches. He knew that if anything was broken, he could say goodbye to his dreams of going to space. Back when the Union had sifted through three thousand potential space program candidates, they'd immediately expelled anyone with past injuries. It wasn't just his knee Lev had to worry about, though.

"Achoo! Ugh..."

Lev had pushed himself too hard in subzero temperatures and was now racked with chills. His body shivered uncontrollably.

By contrast, Irina lay silent, still wrapped in her orange pressure suit. She'd hit her cheek when she landed, but she was otherwise completely fine. Her body temperature and blood pressure were normal, and there were no immediate signs of adverse reactions to her trip through space. She stared somewhat absentmindedly at the necklace resting in the palm of her hand. Was she

thinking about it? About space?

As he sipped a cup of warm tea, Lev thought back to the conversation he and Irina had as they waited in the snowy plains for the rescue team to arrive.

The two of them huddled together under the cover of a parachute, attempting to stave off the cold.

“My body feels so heavy,” Irina said. “It’s like it was all a fleeting dream...” As if filled with stardust, her eyes sparkled behind her long, frozen lashes.

“What did Earth look like?” Lev asked through chattering teeth.

Irina closed her eyes. In a quiet voice, like she was counting precious treasures, she said, “It was wrapped in a transparent blue veil...and it was so beautiful. It was strange to look at it and think ‘That planet is my home.’ The stars were like flowers, like chervils. I could see the moon so clearly. I thought, ‘I really want to go to the moon.’ And then I thought... ‘I don’t want to die, not yet...’”

Even while her body froze, Irina’s fiery passion for the skies still burned brightly in her heart, and Lev felt his own admiration of space grow along with it. However, he didn’t know what chervils were, so he asked.

The vampire girl laughed. “They’re small, white, and very cute. You should look them up at the library.”

Lev observed her sitting there, looking so calm and serene, and he felt like their hearts were in sync.

“Lev... I...”

“Hm?”

“When I looked at the moon, I had a thought... I...”

Irina lowered her gaze bashfully, but before she could continue, they heard the sirens of the rescue team closing in. She instantly leaped away from Lev and clamped her mouth shut. Instead of voicing her thoughts and feelings, she watched as Lev was treated for his wounds.

“You humans are so utterly weak,” she said.

In no time at all, she’d returned to being just as sharp, cold, and standoffish as when they met two months ago. It was such a stark contrast that Lev wondered whether the girl he’d seen crying in the cold had been an illusion. Regardless, she had returned in one piece, and for that Lev was happy. Still, one thought in particular gnawed him relentlessly.

Was Irina really destined to simply vanish from history?

When Irina and Lev returned to the Albinar Cosmodrome, they were taken straight to cozy employee lodgings. As they entered the warm lobby, the scent of a kerosene stove tickled their noses. Thirty-some people—state commission members, engineers, and technicians—stood there to greet them. However, unlike the toasty stove nearby, the attendees were awfully cold. There was no applause, no praise, and no celebration.

Everyone kept their feelings in check, looking at one another, unsure of how to respond to Irina’s return. The girl was a test subject, and they all knew they were supposed to treat her as an object. So strong was the silence that the quiet *whoosh* of the stove’s flame echoed throughout the room.

Anya, standing in one corner of the lobby, shot Irina and Lev an apologetic look. She gently clapped her fingertips together, careful not to make a sound. Lt. Gen. Viktor glared at Lev on his crutches, and Dr. Mozhaysky twiddled his mustache as if he had something to say.

Lev was torn between rage and sadness at this silent welcome for Irina. These were the same people who had joyously celebrated her successful arrival in space from the blockhouse, yet with Irina now in front of them, they wouldn’t give her so much as a “good job.” Irina herself was unsure how to act, so she simply stared at the ground, gripping the sleeves of her pressure suit.

Just as Lev was about to try to lead a round of applause, a triumphant voice filled the air.

“You were magnificent!” Korovin shouted, striding toward them with a flushed face. “What’s wrong with the lot of you?! We must celebrate! To the

safe return of Comrade Irina Luminesk!”

With grandiose, exaggerated motions, Korovin clapped. It was a sign, a signal; once he gave it, the engineers raised their voices in a chorus of victory and hugged each other with glee.

“Hooray! We did it!”

“Welcome back, Irinyan!” Anya hopped forward like an excited puppy. Behind her, Dr. Mozhaysky and Lt. Gen. Viktor grinned.

Lively in its celebrations, the group surged forth and swarmed Lev and Irina. Relieved, Lev looked at Irina to see her blushing as she played with her bangs, embarrassed by all the attention.

“How about joining in a little?” he asked.

“All I did was sit in the rocket cabin...” It was impossible for Irina to hide the awkwardness she felt. This was the first time humans had celebrated her efforts.

Unable to contain his excitement, Korovin placed his hands on Irina’s shoulders. “How was it in space?”

“How was it? Uh...” Irina grappled for the words to convey her thoughts, but then she glared hard at Korovin. “Your engineers did a horrible job. I almost died from the heat. Next time, you’d better make sure you prepare something sturdier. How am I supposed to be satisfied with that bucket of bolts?”

Korovin was a genius, a scientist feared even by the United Kingdom, yet Irina had just hurled complaints directly at him. His eyes widened with shock. However, it was clear from the laughter that followed that he had a soft spot for her sour attitude.

“Ha ha ha! I appreciate your honesty! Did you hear that, folks? She called our rocket a bucket of bolts! We’ve got some work ahead of us, and nobody’s sleeping until it’s done!”

Irina had meant it as an insult, so she was left momentarily speechless.

Korovin, for his part, began another round of applause. “We can save all the space and rocket talk for later! Right now, it’s time to celebrate our comrade’s

safe return, and we'll do it with her beloved nastoyka! Oh, wait a minute." He turned to Irina. "Unfortunately, you're not allowed to drink anything until after your health checks!"

Up in space, Irina had been under strict orders to read only the recipe she was given. But she'd broken the rules and sent a message to Lev, sharing her feelings by talking about nastoyka, his favorite drink. Everyone besides Lev now assumed it was *her* favorite drink.

"N-nastoyka's not really my thing anyway..." she muttered.

The gathered engineers shouted about buying nastoyka somewhere while Irina looked at her feet with beet-red cheeks. Only Lev knew why she was so flustered and embarrassed.

On the outskirts of the revelry, the stone-faced state commission members and Delivery Crew attendees swapped murmurs, then summarily left. *Would it kill you guys to smile once in a while?* Lev thought, gripping his crutches tight in his fists.

None of them saw Irina's life as valuable. The explosives they'd installed in her rocket cabin said it all.

That night, Korovin ordered an official celebration. It took place in the cafeteria of the employee dorms; about thirty people in total attended. A phonograph played the Union's national anthem, and the long banquet table was lined with sour-scented borscht, cans of caviar, glasses of nastoyka, and cheeseburgers.

There were no decorations save for national flags, which gave the event a no-frills atmosphere. Even an everyday birthday party would've been a brighter affair. It was such a small-scale celebration for a literal historical first, and all because the Nosferatu Project was a national secret. Many people working on-site had no idea the launch had even involved a vampire.

"We will devour the United Kingdom and all who challenge us, just like this! To victory!"

At Lt. Gen. Viktor's powerful words, everyone took a bite from their

cheeseburgers. It suddenly felt less like a celebration and more like a political rally. None of it meant anything to Irina, who sipped at her borscht and continued to feel out of place.

“So stupid,” she said with a pout.

Lev sat by her side, sweat running like a river down his face. He looked completely and utterly exhausted.

The boredom and disinterest on Irina’s face turned to worry. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m kind of...in terrible pain...” The painkillers had worn off. Lev’s knee and head throbbed fiercely.

Korovin noticed immediately and lambasted him. “A cosmonaut’s body is their most valuable resource! Those unable to look after themselves are undeserving of the title!”

“My apologies, Chief...”

Having been thoroughly chewed out, Lev left the celebration early and headed to the hospital on the outskirts of the base.

As he was leaving, Lt. Gen. Viktor informed him of the schedule for the next few days. “Irina and the Chief will head to Sangrad to report the flight log at a closed-door central committee meeting. Then they will return to LAIKA44. You’ll come back to LAIKA44 with the rest of us.”

Lev was curious about the central committee meeting. He had a feeling they’d talk about more than the flight logs—they’d also discuss Irina’s future as a test subject. Lev still felt the poison of Roza’s words—that Irina would be “disposed of”—swirling in the far reaches of his heart.

He began, “As her supervisor, wouldn’t it be best if I accompanied—”

“Best if you *what*?” Lt. Gen. Viktor cut in, cracking his knuckles. His gaze could have given Death a run for his money.

“Nothing, sir.” Lev backed down, well aware of how many orders he’d disobeyed recently. Still, the ominous sound of a closed-door meeting had planted a seed of uncertainty in him.

The next day, Lev returned to LAIKA44 and took a good look around town. Like at Albinar, there were no signs of celebration at Irina's successful spaceflight, and the days had carried on as usual. The centrifuge Lev had destroyed to save Irina had simply "broken down"; Franz had been "transferred," and a new engineer came to take his place as if nothing ever happened.

It was suspected that Korovin's political rival, Graudyn, had been behind Franz's actions, but Franz was eventually declared a solo actor, and further investigation was deemed unnecessary. Though it seemed a higher power was at play behind the scenes, Vice-Director Sagalevich said nothing. The candidates had access to no more information than that.

Natalia, the covert Delivery Crew agent, had returned to playing the role of dorm matron and continued her surveillance in disguise.

When Lev encountered her at the service counter of the cafeteria, she sent him on his way with an added whisper. "Be sure to forget the incident, okay?"

Her voice was soft and gentle, but the cold gaze behind her glasses was not a dorm matron's; it could have frozen steaming-hot soup.

After a thorough medical examination, Lev learned his knee bone hadn't suffered damage. That was a huge relief, but it was still a bad injury and would take two weeks to fully heal. His knee screamed with pain, as if someone were bending it forcefully with a pair of pliers.

Leaving the cafeteria, Lev walked on his crutches toward the solitary cells. Along the way, he stared up at the stars twinkling in the night sky above.

"She really made it up there..."

Irina had performed an amazing achievement in spaceflight, and it was completely invisible to anyone unconnected with the project. Since people in both LAIKA44 and Albinar were in the dark about her flight, there was no doubt in Lev's mind that ordinary citizens outside those space development epicenters had no idea it had happened either.

Scientists and engineers, workers on the nation's collective farms, citizens of

the Union, and people around the world in their respective countries simply lived as they always had. They worked when the sun was up, and they slept when the moon took its place. Every single day—be it yesterday, today, or tomorrow—they trundled along without change.

It was heartbreaking to think of just how little proof there was of Irina's amazing flight through the reaches of space.

December 15, three days after launch. When Irina returned to LAIKA44, Lev was called to the Director's Office. He no longer needed crutches, but his knee still hurt, and he walked with a limp.

"Lev Leps, reporting!"

He stepped into a haze of cigarette smoke to find Korovin sitting in his armchair. With him were Lt. Gen. Viktor and Irina, dressed in military uniforms. It had only been three days, but it somehow felt much longer. Lev didn't ask what had transpired at the central committee meeting, but seeing Irina's usual smug arrogance was something of a relief.

Korovin dragged deep from his cigarette and gave a satisfied nod. "The Nosferatu Project was a success, and we know what needs to be done going forward. You have my thanks," he said.

Although Irina had returned safely, there were a total of twenty-two unexpected areas—such as the damaged antenna—needed revision. Those were expected to be improved or repaired before the next launch.

"The test flight might be complete, but the central committee has decided that Irina Luminesk's physical examinations should continue for the foreseeable future."

Irina's physical condition was in stable, normal ranges, but it was possible that the effects of gravity and cosmic rays would take time to show. For that reason, her body weight and x-ray data would be monitored. Lev glanced at Irina, but her expression didn't change. She stayed rooted to the spot.

"And as for you, Lev..."

“Chief!” Lev cried, standing at attention.

Two months ago, when Lev had stood here in this very spot, Korovin said he expected great things. Those words had given Lev a thin ray of hope that Korovin meant his potential reinstatement as a cosmonaut candidate, and now he would know for certain.

Lt. Gen. Viktor wore a stern, grave expression as he brought forth a letter. The room filled with an awful silence. Lev gulped.

“Comrade Lev Leps,” said Lt. Gen. Viktor, his voice low and heavy. “In recognition of your achievements...you are hereby officially promoted to the position of cosmonaut candidate.”

“Understood, Chief!” Lev’s hands balled into fists. He could hardly contain his joy.

Still, Lt. Gen. Viktor made a point of hammering in the gravity of the moment. “Be sure to follow the rules, or you risk another demotion.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Cold sweat dotted Lev’s brow. Beside him, Irina grinned and shook her head. Korovin tapped his cigarette into the ashtray on his desk and stood from his chair to face Lev.

“Returning to the candidate fold does not guarantee you will fly,” he said. “The graduation examination and final candidate-selection process will take place on the seventeenth and eighteenth of January. If you graduate, you will be an officially qualified cosmonaut. Should the Mechta Project proceed without issue, launch is scheduled for spring.”

“Spring...” Lev’s heart pounded at the realization of how soon that was.

“Along with being reinstated as a candidate, you will move back to the dormitory.”

He would be out of the solitary cells—in other words, they were separating him from Irina. A sudden bout of loneliness tugged at him. He knew he couldn’t tell Korovin that he wanted to continue living in solitary confinement, but he *could* still ask about it in his own roundabout way.

“What about supervising Irina?” Lev inquired.

“Your position will be left to her data-gathering supervisor, Anya. At any rate, Irina is expected to be transferred to the Sangrad Military Institute of Medical Science in the near future,” Korovin replied, turning his gaze on Irina.

“Understood,” she said.

It seemed Irina had already been informed of the transfer. For a brief moment, she glanced at Lev, and something pierced his heart. She would soon leave for a place he could not reach so easily.

Feeling a surge of impatience, he launched into a question without even asking permission to speak. “When will this transfer happen?”

Korovin breathed out a lungful of smoke. “It has yet to be decided. Once all the preparations are complete, I suspect. We’ll likely know in about a month’s time.”

Irina said nothing. Perhaps all the arguments had already gone back and forth at the meeting of the central committee, but Lev himself was still full of worries.

“After the physical examinations conclude, will she return to the space development program?”

A hint of suspicion flashed across Korovin’s eyes in response to the ongoing questions, and he pointed his cigarette at Lev. “Are you more concerned with her than your return to the candidate team?”

He’d hit the nail right on the head. Lev played it off with a wave of his hand. “Erm, o-of course not,” he answered quickly. “Never.”

He realized then, however, that he *was* more concerned with Irina’s fate than he’d thought. However, Irina seemed uninterested in the conversation and merely stared out the window.

“Listen to me, zilant.” Korovin crushed his cigarette butt into the ashtray and turned his powerful gaze back on Lev. “Should you graduate and become history’s first cosmonaut, you will bear that responsibility for the rest of your life. The words that come out of your mouth will no longer just be your own. You will be devoting your life to our motherland, and that may involve

sacrificing your connections with those you love. Are you prepared for that?”

The Union’s national policy was “All citizens are equal.” That also meant no individual citizen was special, or allowed to be treated as such. But when the manned spaceflight was eventually made public, it would result in the first national hero since the Union’s foundation forty-five years ago. The cosmonaut would devote their life to their motherland to stand on the battlefield of space, representing the Union’s two hundred million citizens. That was what Korovin was asking of Lev.

Lev looked him in the eye and answered clearly. “Of course. My dream is the dream of our motherland.”

“Very good,” Korovin said, his eyes narrowing as he continued. “But first things first—you won’t be able to even take part in the test unless your leg heals up.”

“Yes, sir...”

Fortunately, there was still a month before the exam. Being unable to exercise for a little while would put him out of peak shape, but Lev was determined to prepare to the best of his abilities.

“You have done well, ziland. I look forward to seeing you again.”

Korovin thrust out his hand, and Lev shook it. The rough, thick-skinned grip reminded Lev of his father, who’d worked the farm in his hometown.

Korovin then offered his hand to Irina. “You also have my gratitude,” he said.

Irina stared at the hand in front of her, but she did not reach for it. Instead, she shrugged and shot Korovin a cheeky grin.

“Why would I care about the gratitude of some unknown old man?”

Irina understood, just as Korovin did, that his very existence was a national secret so confidential that most only knew him as “the chief designer.”

In response, Korovin merely scratched his head, defeated.



Irina and Lev left the Chief's Office and walked the corridor to the entrance. They were heading for the solitary cells, where Lev was to hand off his supervisor duties to Anya.

"Thank you, Irina," said Lev. "It's because of you that I was promoted from reserve."

He smiled; however, Irina lifted her nose at the comment. "Hmph! I didn't go to space just to help you out. But your leg..." She glanced at Lev's knee. "Do you have any idea how much trouble I'll be in if they say it's *my* fault you dropped out of the graduation exam? How's your knee doing, anyway?"

Irina's words were as sharp as always, but she couldn't hide the wavering concern in her eyes.

"I'll be fine. It'll heal in no time."

Lev gave her a thumbs-up. He didn't want to worry her, so he put on a brave front. Unfortunately, the way he limped along wasn't particularly convincing.

"Fine, huh?" Irina crouched and gave Lev's knee a sharp poke.

"Ow!"

Lev staggered backward, colliding with a shelf against the wall. A globe sitting on top wobbled violently, teetering over the edge.

"Whoa!" Lev shouted, scrambling to stop the globe from falling, only to put his weight on his bad knee. "Augh!"

The globe dropping from the shelf continued to follow the laws of gravity. Lev couldn't believe it. If he broke something valuable so soon after being promoted to cosmonaut candidate, he was looking right at another...

Demotion.

Thankfully, Irina swooped in and caught the globe before it hit the floor. She looked at Lev hopping around on one foot.

"You don't *look* like you'll be fine."

"Thanks to you!"

Lev rubbed his sore knee and wondered when they'd started bantering like this. He thought back to when he and Irina first met.

Only two months ago, he'd been appointed supervisor to a vampire. He'd walked this very hall to the solitary cells to meet Irina, feeling as if his life shortened with every step. Now he felt the opposite of frightened. He was walking to the same cells, but this time, to say goodbye. Mission complete. What happened to Irina next was out of his control.

Still, Lev wanted to know what they'd talked about at the committee meeting. He might not like the answer, but this might be his one and only chance to find out—he couldn't let it slip from his grasp. He was still debating whether to ask Irina when he noticed her gaze grow harsh and heard voices from the entrance.

It was a group of cosmonaut candidates, Mikhail and Roza among them. Even in plain training clothes, Mikhail looked like a movie star. Despite being smaller than the young men around her, Roza was distinctly imposing and clearly had the bearings of a leader.

All the candidates' chatter and smiles vanished the moment they saw Lev and Irina. They knew that Irina had made it into space successfully.

"It's the test subject..." one of them muttered.

Lev froze in place. He had a bad feeling that trouble was brewing, but Irina strode right by him, back straight and chin held high.

"Wait," he said, hobbling after her.

They found themselves face-to-face with fifteen candidates. As Lev expected, not one had a single word of praise or congratulations. The air was already thick with rivalry, but Mikhail cut through it with a smile, ignoring Irina and patting Lev on the shoulder.

"I heard the news," he said. "You're back, then?"

"Yeah. No more calling me reserve."

Mikhail's eyes dropped to Lev's knee. "You sure you won't need another year to recover?"

Lev chuckled. "Don't you worry. I'll be doing everything I can to heal up in

time for the exam.” He wanted to leave it at that and go, but another voice stopped him.

“Injuries like that are what you get for cozying up to a cursed species.” Roza shot a fierce glare in Irina’s direction.

Annoyed, Lev tried to put Roza in her place. “Now, look here—”

“Cursed or not, I went to space, and that’s a fact. You jealous?” Irina interjected, flicking her hair behind her shoulders. There was a victorious glint in her eyes. She had gone right for Roza’s weak spot.

Lev facepalmed, incredulous. Unsurprisingly, sparks began to fly between the two ladies, and Roza wasn’t about to back down.

“I won’t have a test subject butting into my conversations,” she spat. “You’re no better than a dog.”

“And you think I like being talked to by a human lowlier than a snow bug?”

“Who are you calling a snow bug?”

“You’re like a whole *swarm* of insects. Shut up.”

“Excuse me?!”

Over a dozen glares lanced through Irina. Only Mikhail stayed calm, watching the interaction with a cold stare.

Irina waved her hands as if swatting at flies. “Would you please get out of my way?” she said. “I have places to be.”

However, the candidates refused to budge. They closed in around her.

“Wait a minute!” Lev cried, wedging himself between Irina and the candidates. “The launch is over. It’s done. Stop it already.” He whirled on Irina. “And quit adding fuel to the fire!”

“They started it.”

Neither side was prepared to surrender, and Lev was trapped in the middle.

“Lev is right,” Mikhail said. “Thanks to that test flight, we learned of the rocket’s deficiencies. Now we’re able to research zero gravity more thoroughly. Just as we were grateful for Maly, we should be grateful to Irina too.” He was

careful to highlight that the vampire girl was only equal to a test animal. “Even I don’t want to go up in a blaze of glory because of an equipment explosion mid-flight.”

Despite saying that, Mikhail practically overflowed with confidence. Roza stood with her arms crossed. She didn’t think his joke about an “equipment explosion” was remotely funny. Roza saw Mikhail as a fearsome rival in the battle to be humanity’s first cosmonaut. Lev didn’t want them to end up hating each other, but he knew trying to smooth things over would likely result in more trouble.

Mikhail looked at his watch and motioned for the candidate group to get moving. “Let’s go. We’ll be late for training.”

The candidates fired one last round of glares at Irina, but they obediently followed Mikhail.

Irina poked her tongue out at their fading silhouettes. “I’ll curse you,” she said.

Lev looked up at the sky, reflecting on the discord. As of tomorrow, he’d move from one side to the other, and he didn’t like thinking about it. When he pondered his relationship with Irina, it only made him anxious.

By the time Lev and Irina left the Training Center, the evening sun had sunk beyond the horizon, and the city was wrapped in the cold of night. The two strolled along tree-lined paths lit by street lamps.

When Lev thought about what to say before they parted, he kept coming back to the central committee meeting. Although Anya was taking over as Irina’s supervisor, it wasn’t easy for Lev to detach himself emotionally. If the Union’s top brass *had* considered whether to dispose of the “test subject,” it seemed unlikely they would tell her directly. That said, if they had so much as hinted to Irina that disposal was in store for her, Lev was determined to do something, *anything* to help her, supervisor or not.

After looking around to make sure they were alone, Lev broached the subject. “At the meeting with the central committee, did you talk about anything other

than the flight report?”

Irina blinked, her eyes widening. “Like what?”

Lev decided to go for it and just ask. “I mean, like, what’s going to happen after your physical examinations are over...”

Irina shrugged, looking a little annoyed. “Have you already forgotten what the Chief said? Are you really more concerned with me than your return to the candidate team?”

“Are you more concerned with her than your return to the candidate team?”

Lev was at a loss for words.

“Are you really ready to become a hero, Mr. Zilant?” Irina teased.

“It’s just... I’m worried about what’s going to happen to you. I couldn’t stop thinking about it while you were away, before you came back. And...we’re going to be separated...” Lev let out what was in his heart.

After a moment of silence, Irina whispered, “You mean what Roza said...about disposal?”

Lev couldn’t speak, so he nodded instead. Irina let out a breath, and her gaze drifted into the distance. For a time, she appeared to be weighing whether to say something, and then she finally opened her mouth again.

“What I’m about to tell you is strictly confidential. That’s what the guy on the committee said to me.”

“Got it.” Lev waited for her to go on. He felt like a patient awaiting a diagnosis.

“When my physical examinations are done...I’m to put my experience to work as part of the design bureau.”

“What?” Lev’s eyes went wide. He couldn’t believe it. “Really?”

“Really. My activities will be restricted, though, since I know state secrets. But I can make a living as part of the engineering team.”

There was no hint of humor in her face. She was dead serious.

“And the design bureau is...the Chief’s department?”

Irina looked troubled by Lev's question. She put a finger to her lips and lowered her voice. "If it gets out that I talked to you about this, we're both in all sorts of trouble."

"O-oh. Yeah, I guess it's better if I don't know."

If he learned any more than he had already, it would probably be easy to see that he knew just from his face.

"This is strictly between the two of us," Irina said, looking for agreement.

Lev saw her serious expression and nodded resolutely. "You'll make a great engineer," he laughed. "As your former instructor, I know it."

Irina crossed her arms, nonplussed. "What are you giggling about? You're talking big and calling yourself my instructor, but what about you?"

"Me?"

"I'm talking about your exam, idiot! If you lose to those fools and miss your chance on the cosmonaut team, I'll bite you all over and suck out your blood. I'll turn you into a bone-dry mummy!" There was fire in Irina's scarlet eyes as they stared him down, boring a hole into him. "If you're really going to call yourself my instructor, then of course you'll be the first human in space, right?"

"Uh, well..."

Put on the spot, Lev couldn't answer immediately. When it came to passion, he was definitely at the top of his class. But if he was being honest with himself, going from reserve to the first human in space wasn't going to be easy.

"I'll do the best I can," he said, but his voice lacked confidence.

Irina heaved a sigh. "The least you could do is *pretend* you'll make it. At any rate, promise me you'll fly up there first."

Lev chuckled and scratched the back of his head.

"Yeah. I'll get there first."

Anya was wrapped in a fur coat, freezing, at the guard room in front of the solitary cells.

“Irinyan! Say hello to your new supervisor,” she greeted them, shivering in the cold as she saluted Irina.

As part of the supervisor role handover, Lev asked Anya about the specifics of her duties, but all she’d heard from Dr. Mozhaysky was that she would “continue gathering data on the test subject until the manned space launch.” Anya had been told nothing of the surrounding government affairs.

“I’ll do the very best I can to complete the duties I have been entrusted with,” she said.

“While I’m away,” Lev began, lowering his voice so Irina couldn’t hear, “please be there for Irina when she needs you.”

“You got it.” Anya flashed a grin. “You don’t need to tell me twice.”

Lev was relieved that he could trust Irina and Anya to get along, but he was also plagued by a new amorphous loneliness. He wondered if this was what fathers felt like when they saw their daughters off to marriage.

Irina’s room was full of a variety of new medical equipment, which Anya explained was for gathering data while the vampire girl slept. Lev peeked into the solitary cell he’d called his room until that morning and found it entirely empty. All the furniture was gone—even the bed.

“They sure move fast...”

There was no place for Lev here anymore. Once he returned his ID at the front desk, he wouldn’t be able to come back. His mission was done, and he had to say goodbye. Truth be told, however, he didn’t want to. He’d promised to be there for Irina’s birthday in three years’ time.

Standing tall, he saluted Irina respectfully. “Thank you,” he told her.

For a moment, it looked like Irina wanted to get something off her chest. Instead, she said, “You’ve done well. You may leave.”

Her arrogant act was airtight. Without another word, she walked to her cell and climbed into her coffin.

At the dormitory cafeteria, Lev received a small welcome party to celebrate

his return to the cosmonaut candidate team. Mikhail, Roza, and the other cosmonauts didn't mention Irina even once. Lt. Gen. Viktor had told them there was no need for them to know details about Irina; still, it was as if saying her name had become taboo. At the same time, Lev was grateful that they weren't pushing him for information. He was glad he didn't have to talk about her.

2200 hours, lights out.

Lev lay tossing and turning on his bunk. He was the only one in the four-man room unable to sleep. The room was heaven compared to the cold and dark solitary cell, but he was so used to his old nocturnal sleep cycle that he was wide awake. In the darkness, his mind drifted to Irina. Surely she would be awake right now too. He wondered if she'd really get along well with Anya.

"Come on, Lev," he said to himself. "You've gotta get some sleep..."

He'd jump back into cosmonaut training tomorrow. Although he couldn't do any physical exercises until his knee completely healed, Lev fully intended to give everything else 120 percent. His heart was set on securing the position of humanity's first cosmonaut, and he wanted to make good on his promise to Irina. Plus, he didn't much like the idea of a blood-sucking vampire turning him into an empty mummy.

"It feels wrong to call her a blood-sucker, though."

In the two months he'd known Irina, she had only sucked blood once, under very special circumstances. Lev rubbed his left arm where she had bitten him, feeling the sensation flow through his mind. It was a sweet pain that throbbed at his very core.

In that moment, he was suddenly hit by a desire—he wanted to feel it again.

"Huh?"

It wasn't like he'd turned into a vampire himself, so where had the urge come from?

Lev chuckled. "I guess I really am tired," he sighed, covering his head with his blanket.

Chapter 2: A Maiden's Prayer

Scarlet Eyes

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DECEMBER 31. The new year approached, and LAIKA44's facilities were silent. Two weeks had passed since Irina and Lev parted ways. Irina no longer had any training, and her days were full of tests and medical examinations.

Irina wasn't under constant observation, but LAIKA44 was a walled city; escape was impossible. Still, the vampire girl felt a little dizzy when Anya said she'd been told to carry tranquilizer needles. Irina realized then that it wasn't just escape the higher-ups were worried about but potential psychological disorders caused by spaceflight too.

Full-body photographs were taken of her upon waking and before sleeping. Those were filed away with exam reports under the title "N44." Irina didn't like how similar it all felt to the way they handled animal test subjects.

Her physical condition and mental state were consistently stable, however, so the paranoid doctors and scientists finally began to relax around her. Her meals were the same as before, calculated for nutritional value. Outside of the tests, she exercised lightly to maintain her health.

To help pass the time, Irina received jigsaw puzzles, a radio, textbooks, and the weekly citizen's paper *The Istina*. However, having just experienced a trip into space, she was utterly bored by her new life of labs and snoozing. She even found herself yearning for the view from a parachute high up in the sky.

She knew Anya was doing her best to make things bearable, but without Lev in her life, Irina felt as if she were wandering through a colorless world.

"The year's almost over..."

Irina sat on her coffin in the freezing cold of her solitary cell, comfortable in

just her military jacket, and looked back on the last year of her life.

She could picture the men in black who had appeared in her village to headhunt, and she remembered the examinations she endured as part of the test-subject selection process at the Military Institute of Medical Science. However, the memories clearest to her were from her two months here in the city of LAIKA44. She had met Lev, experienced all sorts of new training, come into contact with the culture of the species she despised, and—for the first time in her life—forged a bond of blood.

Although she hadn't been able to tell Lev, Irina had felt comfortable joy rush through her body when she sucked his blood. She couldn't summon its taste or smell, but she vividly recalled the warmth of the blood passing down her throat and settling in her stomach, as well as the feeling of power surging through her body. It was enough to give her goosebumps.

She wanted it again. She wanted to drink his blood over and over.

But Irina felt embarrassed at the thought of asking to suck Lev's blood and was certain he would hate her if she did. She took those feelings and tucked them away deep within herself.

Above all else, the biggest moment of the year had been Irina's foray into space, when her dream had come true. When she closed her eyes, the glorious view played across her eyelids, and even now it shook her body and soul. Seeing Earth from space had cleansed her heart of the darkness she'd carried, soothed the hatred she'd shouldered since the day humans murdered her parents, and sated her hunger for this human-dominated world to be destroyed. However, as soon as she returned to Earth, reality had crashed back down on her.

She thought back to the meeting of the central committee, and her heart fluttered. She heaved a heavy sigh.

During the closed-door meeting, Irina had stood with Korovin before government officials. In the private meeting hall, she'd reported the contents of her flight log and her experiences in space. Everyone listened in quiet excitement, rubbing their chins and nodding and muttering, but there was no applause. No cheers. The strongest reaction was to a comment in the flight log that read, "There is no sign of God in space."

“The god you believe in simply was not there,” Irina told them.

At that, a small section of the meeting hall burst into an uproar.

“Well, of course a member of the cursed race couldn’t see God!” someone shouted. Others coughed and sputtered in disbelief.

Numerous people around the world believed that God floated above Earth, watching over them. It wasn’t crazy to think that there would be far worse upheaval if it was announced that such a god did not exist. Thus, Irina was ordered not to speak on the matter.

At the end of Irina’s report, the committee settled on a decision: Should there be no adverse reactions in the test subject, a manned flight could take place in spring of the following year.

As compensation for her work, Irina would be rewarded with, in the committee’s words, “payment for her research cooperation and a cozy dacha in a resort location.” Irina did not believe a word of this, knowing it was just a means of pacification so she’d submit to her physicals, but she said nothing at the time.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Korovin was apologetic. “I believe in your abilities, Irina, and I would like you to take part in our future projects too. However...”

Korovin trailed off, but no other words came. He was usually full of confidence, yet in that moment, he could only scratch the back of his neck anxiously. Perhaps he could not say, or perhaps nothing had been decided yet. Irina didn’t know, so she fell back on her usual attitude.

“I recognize your achievements also,” she had replied. “Should there be another opportunity to join one of your endeavors, I would consider it.” She’d felt her voice waver near the end, but she refused to beg for her life.

The truth of the matter was that Irina’s claim of an invitation to work within the design bureau—the “secret” she’d revealed to Lev—was simply not true.

Reflecting on it now as she sat in her coffin, Irina let out another sigh.

“I lied to him...”

Lev had been so concerned about her that, before she realized it, she'd said what she did. She was glad that he cared enough to worry, but she couldn't let herself get in the way of his upcoming exam. It was thanks to him that she'd realized her dream of going to space, so now, she wanted *his* dream to come true too. Her little lie was the very best she could muster.

Irina wanted to see Lev selected as a cosmonaut, but she was embarrassed at having cried in front of him, so she'd continued to act curtly. She wanted to apologize for his injury, which he'd gotten when he came to rescue her, but she'd ended up poking it instead.

"So many regrets."

Irina mussed her hair with her hands and rolled around in her coffin. She never meant to show Lev her weaknesses, but whenever he was by her side, it put her heart at ease. Now, the cell next to hers was empty.

If Lev *did* become a cosmonaut, where would she be then? What would she be doing? Would she still be alive and living a proper life this time next year? Her doubts and fears piled up like relentless snow, burying her to the point of suffocation.

Irina took off her necklace and held it up to the room's dim light. In the clear blue crystal, she saw Lev's eyes.

"Lev..."

The thought of his injury had nagged at her, so she had asked Anya about it. Apparently, Lev still couldn't run a full sprint on his knee. It pained Irina's heart to imagine that the injury she had caused might be the reason he wasn't chosen as a cosmonaut.

Irina sighed for the umpteenth time. Twirling her bangs with her fingers, she continued to let out little huffs.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. "It's Anya. I'm coming in."

Irina quickly grabbed her copy of *The Istina* and pretended to be bored of reading it. She didn't want Anya to see her looking depressed.

Anya stepped into the room dragging a sack the size of her own body. "And..."

there we go! What do you think? Heh heh...”

Anya pointed to the sack with a giggle. Sensing danger, Irina threw away her copy of *The Istina* and hid in the shadow of her coffin.

“Wh-what is that? I’m not doing another of your weird exams...”

“No! It’s a costume for celebrating the New Year!” Anya stuck her hand in the sack and pulled out a colorful garment. “I managed to get a hold of some traditional Lilitto folk costumes.”

“Oh...”

Irina remembered the dresses and clothes kept in a dedicated room of her family’s castle. It was a dim, hazy memory, but she’d seen her mother and father wear those traditional outfits.

Anya laid the garment on top of Irina’s coffin. “This one is from before the war, so the threads are a little frayed.”

There was an elaborately embroidered blouse with vivid colored beads, a goatskin vest with flower patterns, a collar embroidered with butterflies, and a striped wraparound skirt. It was as if wonderful spring fields had bloomed with colorful flowers inside the dim cell.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” Anya said in a singsong voice as she excitedly put on the blouse.

“Why did you do this? Did someone order it?”

“No. I just wanted us to celebrate the New Year together.” Irina’s jaw dropped as Anya passed her another blouse. “This one is yours. Go ahead, put it on!” she prodded.

“Well... I suppose if you went to the trouble of bringing it here, I’ll do you the favor of wearing it...”

Irina made a show of begrudgingly taking the blouse, but the truth was that she *wanted* to wear it. It was adorable. She put on a strong front and acted mature, but inside, she was just like any other teenager.

She put her hands into the sleeves of the blouse with its embroidered red flowers and fastened it with a leather belt. Her heart leaped with excitement. In

the mirror, a happy face stared back at her.

“It’s so cute!” Anya gushed. “It really suits you!”

“Y-you think so...?”



Irina felt suddenly embarrassed by the compliment. She fidgeted bashfully with the blouse's collar.

"I brought food too!"

Anya took a mat from the sack and placed it on the floor, then lined it with plastic containers, each containing a different food.

"So, we've got herring on a bed of potato salad with chicken and mayonnaise—also known as 'herring under a fur coat'—and traditional Lilitto dishes too. Oh, and sarmale. I wanted you to enjoy this to the fullest, so I garnished every dish with herbs. It was pretty hard work, actually."

Irina felt the warmth of Anya's gesture in the depths of her heart. People often said that vampires detested the strong scent of herbs, but that was a rumor perpetuated by the church. In truth, eating herbs gave vampires a chance to taste foods they couldn't experience otherwise.

While she was happy that Anya had made food for her, Irina couldn't help but wonder why Anya wasn't celebrating the New Year with her family. Most of the researchers and scientists had left early to do just that. When Irina asked, however, she found herself shocked by Anya's answer.

"I don't have a family. Ever since I was a child, I've been by myself." Anya said it so casually, it was as if she were introducing another dish on the menu.

"Huh?"

"I'm a war orphan. I'm actually from Lilitto, just like you."

"Really?!"

Irina's eyes widened as Anya told her about her own past.

Anya had been born in an industrial city far from Anival Village, the so-called Village of Vampires. However, that city was bombed and destroyed. One-year-old Anya and her mother had been buried under rubble, and the infant had cried and cried.

"I don't remember any of that, though. I don't even know what my parents look like. I only know my name is Anya Simonyan because it was on my name card."

Even though she too was a war orphan, Irina felt more fortunate than Anya somehow. She still had fond memories of time spent with her parents, and of conversations she'd had with them.

"What happened then?" she asked Anya.

"The Zirnitran military took me in."

Anya didn't seem particularly sad about it. She handed Irina her cutlery and went on with her story, explaining that she'd been raised at a children's home, where they noticed she had an aptitude for learning. At fifteen, she finished school and joined the Air Force Medical Institute.

"I didn't care about vampires to begin with, but the research papers were really interesting. That's how I got sucked in."

"You weren't scared? I heard that even kids in Lilitto were scared of vampires..."

Anya shook her head. "The teachers at the children's home were way scarier. They'd shout and hit the students in a rage. They were all like Vice-Director Sagalevich."

"Ugh. That must have been the worst."

"Right?"

Sharing a shrug, the girls giggled. Even without Lev, Irina felt glad to have Anya here with her. More than anything else, she felt kinship with Anya, who shared her motherland and had experienced a similar life.

Even though she's...human.

The thought whizzed through Irina's mind, but she decided not to let that bother her anymore.

After piling their plates with food, Anya pointed at the clock. "Almost there!"

Thirty seconds remained until midnight. They watched in silence as the clock's second hand ticked ever onward. Fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine...

"Happy New Year!"

"Happy New Year."

As 1961 arrived, the two girls ate and celebrated. Irina couldn't remember the last time she'd spent New Year's Eve in the company of others. She was so used to spending it alone, staring up at the night sky as she recited the poem of the moon.

Irina enjoyed Anya's company, but she secretly felt it would have been even better if Lev were with her. However, neither Lev nor any other cosmonaut candidates were in LAIKA44. Irina found out from Anya that none of them had returned home; they'd all told their families they were on business far away.

Cosmonaut candidates were bound by rules to rest at a designated vacation spot three times a year. The candidates had left together with Lt. Gen. Viktor. As for Korovin and the engineering team, they were spending New Year's holed up in the offices of the design bureau, repairing and revising the spaceship's known weaknesses.

Hearing about Korovin and Lev made Irina feel left behind. The space development program was moving into the future, and Irina suffered a stinging sense of solitude, as if she were getting further and further away from space all alone.

"Oh... I'm sorry. Is my cooking not very good?"

Anya leaned in and studied Irina, who'd been so lost in thought that she'd barely touched her food.

"No, it smells great. It's way better than what they serve us in the cafeteria."

Irina took a bite of dressed herring. She wasn't lying; she really did love the smell of the herbs.

Anya smiled, relieved. "I'm so glad! Oh, but don't go telling Natalia that you prefer my cooking, okay? Sometimes I worry her stare's gonna freeze me to the spot..."

Evidently, Anya didn't know that the dorm matron was in fact a Delivery Crew agent. Irina was tempted to reveal the truth, but she had a feeling that would be a whole other can of worms, so she kept it to herself. Thinking of the Delivery Crew, and how they'd put explosives in the cabin during her flight, it occurred to her that there were all sorts of people in the secret police.

Anya, meanwhile, poked a potato with a fork, then seemed to realize something herself. “Right! I almost forgot! We have to go outside after this to make New Year’s wishes!”

It was a Lilitto tradition to throw pine cones into the river and pray for good fortune for the year ahead. It was said that when the river cleansed your pine cone, your wish would come true. LAIKA44 didn’t have any rivers nearby, but Anya thought the man-made lake on the edge of town would be enough. “It’s all water anyway,” she said.

Irina had fond memories of skating at that lake with Lev—a secret rendezvous Anya naturally knew nothing about.

After their meal, Irina and Anya put on their overcoats and went outside. Each breath came out in a puff of pure white. The silver birches lining the streets were natural ice sculptures shaped by windswept ice and heaping snow. They sparkled like crystalline illusions under the light of the moon.

Because LAIKA44 was a closed city, it did not officially exist. Loud celebrations—such as those involving fireworks—were strictly prohibited. Still, even in the freezing dead of night, the lights of the bars remained on, and people walked the streets. The city was wrapped in a different kind of celebratory atmosphere.

As she and Anya walked, Irina saw the old tobacconist with a young girl. Both were dressed rather strangely. The old man was clad in a blue coat, wore an aristocratic hat with a fake beard, and walked along with a golden cane. The girl, whose hair was in a long three-strand braid, also wore a blue coat, and she carried a white bag.

“What is that?” Irina muttered, eyeing them suspiciously.

Noticing her gaze, the young girl held a piece of candy out to Irina. “Happy New Year, Miss!”

Irina didn’t take the candy. Instead, she continued to stare at the odd pair. “Why are the two of you dressed so weird?” she asked, her voice cold.

“I’m...dressed weird?” The girl pulled the candy back, looking on the verge of tears.

What Irina didn't know was that the two were dressed as winter spirits common during the New Year: Ded Moroz and Snegurochka. Unfortunately, that tradition did not exist in Lilitto.

Sensing that Irina was perplexed, Anya quickly squeezed between her and the girl and smiled politely. "Happy New Year, Snegurochka!"

"Oh! Happy New Year!"

Right away, the girl perked up and passed Anya a piece of candy. She then looked hesitantly at Irina, who did her best to play along.

"Happy New Year, um...Snail Retch...Car...?"

"Snegurochka!" the girl cried, pouting at having her name misspoken.

"I'm sorry. Snegurochka, is it?"

"What's your name, Miss?"

"Irina Luminesk."

The girl gave Irina some candy. "Happy New Year, Irina Luminesk! Rina!"

It was like making a friend. Successfully navigating the heretofore unknown New Year's tradition warmed Irina's heart. However, she was also aware that this girl would be frightened of her if she knew Irina was a vampire. She was careful not to show her fangs as she smiled and thanked the girl for the gift.

As far as little Snegurochka was concerned, Irina was just another human. When Irina realized that, she wondered what was so different about humans and vampires anyway. It was a puzzle she had yet to solve.

Irina and Anya headed to the artificial lake, rolling candies along their tongues. As they looked for pine cones to throw with their wishes, Irina wondered what to pray for.

A trip to the moon? Even if she wished for that, she knew it couldn't possibly come true in a year. *That I survive until the end of next year?* It wasn't like she could overturn the committee's decision with a wish.

Irina struggled for something more positive to wish for, but before she

thought of anything, they arrived at the lake. The moon floated in the sky above.

LAIKA44's residents seldom came out to the lake so late at night, but tonight, some young people were drinking by the shore. Their drunken laughter seemed to echo across the open space. Anya and Irina walked to the lake's edge, their feet halting as they stared at the thick ice covering the surface.

"I'm so sorry," Anya said, furrowing her brow apologetically. "I completely forgot the lake would be frozen. Our pine cones won't sink..."

"They'll sink when the ice melts. Isn't that enough?"

Immediately, Anya perked back up. "That's a good point! Let's do it!"

Anya held a pine cone to her chest, closed her eyes, and prayed. Almost as quickly, she threw her pine cone at the lake with a grunt. Irina, however, felt a little uncertain. She still hadn't decided what to wish for. What *did* she want most? Last year, and the year before that, she'd wished to take a flight through space. But now her wish had come true. This year, what she wanted most was...

"I've got it."

Irina held her own pine cone close to her chest, praying, *I wish for Lev's knee to get better and for him to be chosen as a cosmonaut!*

She threw the pine cone toward the sky. It covered the moon for a brief instant as it arced through the air, then dropped on the surface of the frozen lake and rolled along the ice.

"What did you wish for?" Anya asked her.

"Hm?"

"You looked so serious. Like you weren't sure about it at first."

Irina lowered her eyes, gently stomping the frost around her feet. "Well, it can be anything, right? Besides, since you're asking, shouldn't you share what *you* wished for first?"

"I wished for the two of us to become good friends," Anya said honestly, her face lighting up in a smile.

Irina felt like she'd been brought to a screeching halt. She couldn't believe it. "Is that a joke?"

"I really mean it. There's so much I want to talk to you about. Space, vampires, all sorts of things."

There was sincerity in Anya's eyes as she spoke. Her words were no lie.

"You're so...honest. I'm not used to it."

"When I was growing up, they told me that if I lied, the Delivery Crew would come punish me." It sounded like a joke, but Anya said it with a straight face.

"Anyway, what did you wish for, Irinyan? I just told you my wish."

"Uh, well..." Put on the spot, Irina blurted, "Glory to the motherland."

"What?"

Irina had uttered the headline of the issue of *The Istina* back in her cell.

"I wished for glory to the motherland. Got a problem with that?"

"No, but..." Anya didn't push the point; Irina's menacing tone seemingly overwhelmed her.

The whole thing struck Irina as curious. Why were Lev and Anya both so honest? Irina had always felt like she needed to keep her guard up around humans, but with Lev and Anya, she started to doubt herself. Even now, she wondered if she should just take a chance and tell Anya what she'd prayed for. Then again, the thought alone was embarrassing, and her cheeks grew hot.

"Are you okay?" asked Anya. "Your face is all red!"

"Wha—?! It's nothing!"

Irina put both hands to her cheeks and turned away from the lake. She started walking briskly along the still-frozen path.

"Huh? H-hey, wait!"

Anya skidded along the slippery ice as she rushed to catch up with Irina.

Good friends, hm?

Anya's wish replayed in Irina's mind. In the past, it would have made her

terribly suspicious; she would have looked for an ulterior motive. Now she simply felt happy.

“Got you!”

Anya grabbed Irina’s arm. The vampire girl whipped around, startled, and found Anya smiling.

“I hope this year is a good one!” Anya exclaimed.

Maybe she and Anya really could become good friends, Irina reflected. She had the strangest sense that her trip to space had changed something inside her.

“Yes. Let’s hope for the best.”

Irina slowed down to match Anya’s pace. Their white breaths merged into one, disappearing into the starry sky above.

Chapter 3: The Final Cosmonaut Exam

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

JANUARY 17, the first day of the cosmonaut candidate graduation exams. Lev's knee had fully healed, and Lev gathered with the other candidates in the Training Center's conference room. The air was so tense, you could have cut it with a knife.

All sixteen cosmonaut hopefuls stood at attention before Lt. Gen. Viktor. Lev was at the end of the lineup, having been promoted from reserve to candidate only recently. His was also the last name called.

There had originally been twenty candidates, but over the last few months, four had left for various reasons.

Candidate #2: Unidentifiable internal bleeding after centrifuge training. Disqualified.

Candidate #6: Injured neck during high-dive exercises at the pool. Disqualified.

Candidate #10: Admitted to hospital for a hernia operation. Disqualified.

Candidate #14: Failed landing during parachute training. Compound fractures in both legs. Disqualified.

Only those who overcame the genuinely grueling training earned the right to take the graduation exam.

In many ways, the scientists developing the rockets seemed more qualified for space research than members of the air force. However, the scientists themselves had unanimously voted in favor of soldiers manning the spaceflights. As far as they were concerned, it was more efficient to teach

qualified cosmonauts the required science than for scientists to withstand the exhausting training. As technology improved, the scientists would one day fly to space themselves—but until then, sending them was unrealistic.

“Comrades,” Lt. Gen. Viktor said, his voice hard. “I will now explain the examination process.”

It was finally time. Lev stood straight and stiff. Even Mikhail and Roza, usually portraits of calm confidence, wore grave expressions.

“Through this examination, six of you will graduate to become the official cosmonauts of the Mechta Project. Of those six, three will be selected for the manned spaceflight in spring. The remaining three will act as backup.”

In other words, if Lev couldn’t make the top three, there was no way to know when he’d be able to fly to space. Depending on project schedules, it might not be for several years.

“The final six cosmonauts will be our answer to the United Kingdom’s so-called Hermes Seven. You will be the Mechta Shest. The central committee believes there is great meaning in a victory with lesser numbers.”

Lev heard Mikhail let out a dry chuckle. He knew just as well as Mikhail did that it was all little more than a stubborn competition between countries looking to one-up each other, but neither candidate had the rank to say anything.

The Union was so intent on this excessive show of competition for a reason: On December 17, the United Kingdom had successfully launched an unmanned spaceflight *and* announced three of the Hermes Seven as candidates for the next launch.

Unlike the Zirnitra Union, the United Kingdom made its space development information public, so Lev and the other candidates could see and know the names and faces of their rivals. They were military members, just like the cosmonaut candidates, but they looked a little older. Lev didn’t feel competitive toward them, though. Instead, he wished they could share information and talk about space together. He saw the Hermes Seven as comrades from a different country. As long as the Union insisted on secrecy, however, his wishes would never become a reality.

“History’s first cosmonaut will carry not just the nation on their shoulders,” Viktor announced, raising his fist high. “They will go down in history as a hero, so it is imperative that we select the right person! Keep that in the forefront of your minds as you take this examination!”

“Sir, yes, sir!” The cosmonaut candidates saluted.

With that, the two-day exam to finalize the cosmonaut team began.

The candidates’ examination covered all the training they had done until that point. There was a written component covering scientific theory and technology, a foreign language component, a physical exam, specialized equipment use, and a parachute descent. The exam used a point deduction method, and each component had a high passing standard. Lt. Gen. Viktor would be present for both days of the exam to provide unbiased grading.

The sixteen candidates were the country’s finest, selected from three thousand applicants. Still, even among the best of the best, there were apparent differences—not technical or physical, but psychological disparities. Some people, finally realizing the heavy responsibility of the words “history’s first,” approached the exam so as *not* to be selected. Others found their enthusiasm completely exhausted and did their duty just to avoid getting sacked.

Although Lev was not outstanding in any particular area, he was within the top four in every single one. His injury cost him a little strength and stamina, but he made up for that in the other parts of the exam. When it came to the battle for first place, it was all between Mikhail and Roza.

“Come on, let’s head to the next exam area,” Mikhail said.

He hadn’t been appointed leader, but Mikhail smoothly gathered and directed the other candidates. In all likelihood, he did that as a calculated attempt to show Lt. Gen. Viktor that he was best suited for the cosmonaut team. Outside of a penchant for arrogant behavior, Mikhail had very few weak points.

In contrast, Roza kept to herself and performed with calm, cool perfection.

She made no attempt to flatter anyone. She kept herself alone, aloof, and apart, like a white rose blooming in the desert.

In each component of the exam, Mikhail and Roza lost no points. As long as neither suffered an injury, they were guaranteed spots on the team. Every other candidate had to fight for third place. That resulted in some attempting to go beyond their own limits.

“Someone call a doctor!”

One candidate, who’d failed the foreign language component, tried to make up for it in the hot room and ended up with heatstroke.

“Hey, are you all right?!” Lev asked as the candidate was carried out on a stretcher.

But the weak voice that replied was full of hatred. “I hope you all...burn like the test dogs...”

“Huh?” Lev was stunned by the words, which felt like a curse.

The friendly atmosphere of the candidate group had all but vanished, transformed into cold cruelty. With limited spots on the team, and only a few candidates earning a potential or guaranteed place on the rocket, struggle and competition were unavoidable.

Lev knew there was no sugarcoating the process, yet he hated the heavy, oppressive air. He didn’t want to be enemies fighting tooth and nail for a seat on the cosmonaut team—he wanted to be friends aiming for the stars together. For that reason, he talked to everyone with friendly positivity. While they warmed up before their run, he joked with those around him.

“How about we put some bets down? Winner gets everyone’s space food. Apparently tonight’s menu is ‘savory meat jelly.’ Hm... Actually, come to think of it, who’d even want to win if we did that?”

One of the candidates shook his head at Lev’s attempt and replied, “Maybe make sure your shoes are tied before you start making jokes.”

“Oops!” Lev knelt to tie his shoes, chuckling. “I don’t know why I’m so bad at tying my own shoes.”

“Jeez, Lev. If you tie them like that, the laces will face the wrong way.”

“Oh, right!” Lev cracked up again.

“How am I supposed to take this seriously with guys like you around, Lev?”

Lev continued to laugh it off. Everyone looked at him like he was a lost cause, but he had a natural ability to soothe the people around him. Not that it was any time for Lev to be laughing; he’d lost a lot of points in the physical portions of the exam because of all the time he’d lost to bedrest. His knee had completely healed, but two weeks without any running made things harder than he had imagined.

With the first day of exams over, the candidates ate dinner in the cafeteria. No one made a peep, and the room echoed only with the clinking of cutlery and the rumbling of kerosene heaters.

Mikhail and Roza ate as they always did, but most of the candidates barely touched their meals. Lev held his space food dejectedly, sighing as he thought back to the results of the day’s exams. When he ran the numbers in his head, he was around fifth place. The thought made his horrible space food taste even worse.

Lev had already bounced back from being a reserve. He wouldn’t lose anything by not making the cosmonaut team. However, he didn’t want to have to tell Irina that he hadn’t made the cut. They hadn’t met since they parted at Irina’s cell, which was already a month ago. Assuming there were no changes to the schedule, she’d soon be transferred to the Military Institute of Medical Science. He hoped he could give her some good news before she left.

“I can do this!” Lev whispered to himself.

Irina gave it her all. I owe her the same effort.

His spirits bolstered, Lev ate the rest of his space food in a single gulp.

It was the second day of the exams. Lev had wanted to believe the candidates were all working toward the same goal, but a shocking turn of events had left

him feeling hollow.

“If you aren’t going to aim for the top, then go back home to your bumpkin village!”

Roza’s rage had been aimed at a candidate trying to lose a basketball game. Her anger was only natural; her life and career depended on these exams, and she would not stand for anyone getting in her way. It wasn’t just Roza either; her teammates were equally livid.

Lt. Gen. Viktor watched the match in silence. Lev and the other candidates had no idea how arguments between teams would harm their scores. Mikhail didn’t say anything either, choosing instead to observe from afar.

Roza pointed off the court. “Leave,” she demanded. “We need to play the rest of the match.”

The male candidate she spoke to glared back at her. “You should know your place, girl.”

Those words were enough to send Roza’s anger up a notch. “What’s being a girl have to do with it?” she asked, shoving his shoulder.

Lev jumped between them, knowing things would escalate if he didn’t act.

“Stop it, both of you!” he said, turning to the disgruntled candidate. “Roza is right; you have to decide. If you’re not here to fly into space, you shouldn’t be here at all.”

The candidate clicked his tongue in a show of irritation. “You arrogant son of a... All you ever did was suck up to the Chief and babysit a vampire.”

“Wait a sec—”

Lt. Gen. Viktor’s angry shout cut him off. “That’s enough!” Viktor glared at the candidate and ran his thumb across his throat in a cutting gesture. “Go back to the dormitory. Pack up your things.”

The candidate kicked the basketball in frustration, his dismissal now official. He was clearly vexed, but he also looked a little relieved.

Lev couldn’t stand that he’d been called a suck-up, but Roza had sharp words for *him* too. “He has to make a decision?” She scoffed. “Can you even say

you've made one yourself? All I ever see you do is laugh and clown around."

"Nobody wants to go to space more than I do. Nobody."

Lev spoke from the heart, and it showed in the determination on his face.

When the sun set, and the temperature dropped below freezing, the exam's final component began. It was a parachute descent from an altitude of seven thousand meters. Below the candidates, black snow clouds spread like a carpet, and the powerful breath of Moroz froze their fingers. Visibility was also low. It was the worst possible weather for a parachute jump.

The strong winds whisked the candidates far from the landing point; some ended up in trees, and others almost landed in the swamp. Conditions were awful, and even Mikhail and Roza fell shy of the landing point, resulting in their first point deductions of the whole two days.

Finally, it was Lev's turn. The cold wind blew, and the darkness stretching below stirred up primal fear within him. But Lev had confidence that outweighed his terror—after all, he'd jumped in these conditions multiple times while training Irina. She'd overcome her fear of heights in just two weeks and successfully parachuted in the midst of a fierce snowstorm. If she could do it, Lev knew he could do it too. He *had* to do it. It was his reason for being here. He wouldn't let anybody call him a suck-up. If he failed here and now, he'd be trampling everything Irina had worked for.

Lev got into exit posture, crossing his arms and gripping his shoulders.

"I've got this." He looked out at the scenery. Then he shouted, "I'm ready! Three, two, one, go!"

Lev threw himself into the darkness of night—and, in that darkness spreading beneath him, the moon's reflection shone in the water below.

Scarlet Eyes

• очи алый •

IRINA AND ANYA left the biomedical laboratory, and light snow carried on a cold wind hit their bodies. Anya shivered, closing her fur coat tightly around her.

“It feels colder than usual tonight,” she said.

“Yeah...” Irina sank into melancholy, her voice on the verge of disappearing completely. She’d just received an important notification from the chief of research.

“It has been decided. Your transfer to the Sangrad Military Institute of Medical Science is scheduled for the twenty-second.”

It was already the eighteenth, which gave Irina four days. It was all too soon. However, in the Union, the state’s orders were absolute, and decisions often came without warning. It felt like someone had dropped a bucket of cold water on her; there was no time to prepare, no time to discuss. Irina had always known the higher-ups would transfer her, but now that a date was set, she felt churning anxiety she could not put into words. Even though Anya would go with her, Irina was lonely at the thought of being so far from Lev, and her heart refused to settle.

“I’m sorry,” Anya said, noticing the dejected look on Irina’s face.

“Huh?”

“They won’t tell me anything about what’s going to happen after the manned spaceflight. You must be so worried. Maybe they really haven’t decided yet, but... I feel powerless. It’s like there’s nothing I can do to support you...”

Irina didn’t think it was Anya’s fault. Still, there was one thing she’d asked Anya for help with. She wanted the other girl to keep up the lie she’d told Lev about moving to the design bureau as an engineer.

“He’ll ask about it, I know he will. So, I... Well, I just don’t want him to worry about me.”

Anya understood Irina’s position, and she nodded firmly in reply. “If he asks me anything, I’ll stick to your story.”

“Thank you.” Irina looked out at the city, draped in dim darkness while the

moon was hidden behind the clouds. “I guess I have to say goodbye to this place too...”

She’d only been in LAIKA44 for three months, but it had come to seem like a second home. However, it wasn’t the amount of time Irina had spent here that made her feel that way—it was the experiences she could never forget. Her memories of struggling each and every day to prepare for space travel were etched deeply into her mind and body.

She and Anya neared a tree-lined path. It was the one that Irina had walked with Lev every day during her training. At the end of that path was a vending machine stocked with soda water. Lev had a habit of drinking a cup to finish the day’s training. He’d offered her some soda water when she was first curious about it; initially, she’d turned him down. After their bond of blood, however, she’d started drinking soda water occasionally. There was only one cup at the machine, so she and Lev had lightly washed it and shared it between them, an act that was a little awkward and just as embarrassing.

“Um... Anya? Today was the graduation exam, right?”

Irina brought it up as if the thought had just crossed her mind, but she’d actually been thinking about it all day.

“Oh, that’s right. It is.” Anya didn’t seem particularly interested.

“Have the results been announced yet?”

“According to Dr. Mozhaysky, they’ll be announced tomorrow evening.”

“Tomorrow...”

“Are you curious about the results?”

“A bit, yes... I wonder who’s going to space next after me.”

Irina tried to act blasé about it, but she prayed Lev would be selected. Her pulse quickened at the thought. Then she looked at the end of the path, and her heart leaped in her chest. A group of candidates stood in front of the vending machine, Lev among them. Irina stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Anya asked, tilting her head. She couldn’t see the candidates, since she lacked Irina’s night vision. Lev couldn’t see Irina and Anya

either.

Irina yearned to ask Lev about the exam. She ached to tell him about her transfer. But she couldn't move. It was as if her legs were trapped in the snow. Lev chuckled and chatted with the other candidates as they sipped soda water, and he even waved to Roza with a smile as she left for the dormitories.

The cosmonaut candidates seemed in high spirits; perhaps the exam had gone well. Irina felt something like relief, but she wondered why Lev had smiled at Roza. Jealousy pricked her heart. Seeing Lev chatting with other humans, she felt an invisible wall between them, separating the world he lived in from her own. She hadn't seen any borders when she looked down at Earth from space, but still, they existed.

Lev and the other candidates finished their soda water and left, walking along lamplit paths. Irina stood rooted in place.

Anya squinted, looking ahead. "Oh!" she gasped. "Was that Lev?"

Irina almost shrieked. "D-don't be ridiculous! I just wanted to drink some soda water!"

"Uh-huh... Well, okay then," Anya said meaningfully, giving Irina's shoulder a little nudge.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing! Let's go get some soda water. My treat."

Though she had been shrinking in the cold just moments ago, Anya now walked with something of a spring in her step. Throughout the rest of Irina's exams, which lasted until dawn, Anya had a knowing grin on her face every time she looked at Irina.

"Whew... I am so tired..." Irina murmured.

After finishing her work for the day and having a shower, she returned to her cell to find Anya flipping through a book on her desk.

"Ack! What are you doing?!" Irina cried, throwing away the towel she was using to dry her hair and running to Anya. "Don't go touching my things!"

“You drew this, huh?”

Anya raised her head to look at Irina, pointing to a corner of the book. She cocked an eyebrow. On that page was a picture of a circle and a triangular shape Irina had scribbled in pencil, part of a flipbook the vampire girl had drawn. Now that Anya had seen the flipbook, Irina couldn't explain it away.

“So I was bored,” Irina said uncaringly. “I don't know which old ideologist wrote that book, but it's super dull. And what's wrong with a little flipbook?”

“There's nothing wrong with it, but...” Anya flipped through the pages again as she spoke. “Why does the carrot get close to the pancake?”

“Huh?”

“The carrot, it's like...*zoom!* And it heads to the pancake.”

“It's not a carrot!” Irina hissed, baring her fangs. “It's a rocket to the moon!”

“What?! This...is a rocket...?”

Anya froze, the book still in her hand. No matter which way she looked at it, all she saw was a carrot and a pancake. To be fair, Irina didn't think the drawing looked much like a rocket either. Too embarrassed to admit it, she simply shrugged as if ending the conversation.

“Humans and vampires have different eyes for aesthetics.”

Anya shook her head. “In all my research, there's no data to back up such a —”

“Shut up!” Irina slammed a pencil on the table with the palm of her hand. “*You* draw it then!”

“Yes, ma'am!”

Anya picked up the pencil, found a blank space in the book, and began to draw. Her illustration was detailed and complex—artistry that would've been right at home in the design bureau.

“Hrm... It's not *that* good,” Irina muttered.

She threw the book away, refusing to admit defeat. But as she kneeled to pick up the towel lying on the floor, Anya asked her a question.

“Do you want to go to space again?”

“Huh?” Irina turned around and saw Anya pick up the book.

“It’d be great if you could go all the way to the moon someday.”

Irina said nothing. She covered her head with her towel and looked up at the light hanging from the ceiling. The lunny kamen around her neck glowed with soft blue light.

“I don’t have to, because you can take it yourself when you go to the moon.”

Irina still believed the words Lev had said to her right before launch. She dreamed that, one day, she’d be able to fly again.

Black Dragon’s Eyes

• очи цирнитра •

AT THE HEART of the capital of Sangrad was a walled-off area called the Kremli —also known as the Neglin. Flags of twin black dragons on red soil flapped in the breeze, and a magnificent palace—a relic from the old empire—towered over all from the center. A beautiful church and a treasury stood beside the palace.

In one section of the Kremli, the central committee was holding a top-secret meeting at the office of the Ministerial Cabinet. Their agenda consisted of countermeasures to the United Kingdom of Arnack’s progress in space development, and even First Secretary Fyodor Gergiev, Supreme Leader of the Zirnitra Union, was in attendance.

According to intelligence reports, the United Kingdom was planning to launch a manned spaceflight sometime between spring and summer. The Union, which couldn’t afford to lose such a battle, chose to move up its own launch schedules in response.

Dr. Mozhaysky stood to give his report. “Subject N44, Irina Luminesk, is both physically and mentally healthy. We plan to run more precise tests soon.”

“Yes, yeees!” Gergiev nodded over and over in an exaggerated fashion.

A man of regular height and build, Gergiev wasn't as muscular as one might expect of a military man. However, he had a charming smile and spoke as much with his hands and body as with his voice. Even now, his boisterous shouts cemented his strong presence. When he visited the United Kingdom two years ago, they had taken to calling him the “Blabbering Sunflower” behind his back.

Gergiev whipped around to point at Korovin. “Comrade Chief! Are the preparations proceeding as expected?!”

“If everything goes well, we'll enter final testing in March.”

Korovin and the engineering teams had been working day and night, motivated by Irina's successful flight. Though the outcome had not been made public, the endeavor alone had been a major boost to their morale.

“Then we'll launch in April!” Gergiev shouted. “I assume there are no objections?”

There was another reason for his decisive push. Although Gergiev had overthrown the old government, which ruled by way of fear, the past clung on through committee members and the Delivery Crew. They weren't fans of Gergiev's methods, and he would get nowhere unless he took some risks.

When it was clear that there were no objections to the launch date, the committee moved to the next item on the agenda.

“Now that the manned spaceflight has succeeded, what should be done about the test subject?”

An answer came quickly and without hesitation. “Execution.”

The voice belonged to the vice-president of the Delivery Crew, who embodied the old ways. He was a cold, calculating man, still caught up in the great purges of the past. It was he who had insisted upon the explosives in Irina's rocket. His sly gaze was the polar opposite of Gergiev's bright energy, and he spoke in an emotionless, robotic tone.

“I understand the necessity of researching potential side effects until *humanity's* first manned launch. But there are no benefits to allowing the test

subject to live past that point. We have also received reports of potential spies in the development bureaus. Once the test subject serves its purpose, it should be disposed of quickly—by illness or accident.”

Members of the former party and the Union’s uppermost committee members rose from their seats to applaud him. The United Kingdom was not the only threat to the Union. Agents from other countries were also sniffing around Sangrad in search of a scoop on spaceflight. Though the space development program was confidential, tens of thousands of people worked on it in some capacity, meaning leaks were inevitable. If the Mechta Project were brought to light, the Nosferatu Project might be uncovered along with it.

All the same, Gergiev recommended that they defer the decision about the test subject’s execution. “There is still time before the launch. This is not something that we should decide lightly! We cannot go back on a decision once it’s finalized!”

Gergiev wasn’t entirely heartless; he had grieved the loss of the test dog Maly, for instance. His decision to push the Nosferatu Project, even with its high potential for failure, was a logical choice based on what he could lose or gain as leader. In short, he believed they should allow Irina to live if she could provide value. He was against the outdated idea of simply erasing that which was inconvenient. Much hatred had developed for the old government due to its excessive insistence on making people vanish—one of many reasons it had been overthrown. At the same time, if Gergiev deemed something “unnecessary,” it would be disposed of without question.

Many committee members also privately opposed Irina’s execution. They sympathized with her and, in truth, the joy they felt at her successful launch surpassed barriers of race and species. Yet none could put those feelings into words, since the central committee had no need for sentiment.

All for the glory of the motherland.

Everyone obeyed those words. Even Korovin, the leading figure in the Union’s space development, had no power to change Irina’s future. Still, he was a kind man, and he wanted to protect Irina because she had given herself to the space program.

“She is cooperative and devoted,” he said. “She is a member of our team, and I recognize her as such.”

The Delivery Crew’s vice-president quickly cut down Korovin’s emotional comment.

“Those factors are of no importance. Should information about the test subject leak, it will already be too late. If N44 defects with its secrets, what then? If it is kidnapped by an enemy agent, what then?”

The debate went back and forth, treating Irina as nothing more than a test animal or prisoner of war. In the end, the meeting drew to a close before the committee could make a decision. While Irina’s execution had been deferred, her life was still clutched tightly in the committee’s hands.

Gergiev returned to his office, where he went over the contents of the meeting with a tall, slim woman in a black suit. Her hair was tied up neatly away from her face. Two cups of tea sat between them.

“Damn all of those who claim to be the old guard,” Gergiev said. “They’re behind the times! Their first answer is to purge their problems, and their second answer is to purge again. We have already lost twenty million lives to these purges. Do they intend to throw away all the manpower in our country?”

He took a spoonful of strawberry varenye and shoved it angrily into his mouth, washing it down with a mouthful of tea. The woman across from him ate her varenye gracefully without so much as sipping her tea. Her deep green eyes lit up as she placed a strawberry in her mouth.

“Perhaps you need an organization to jail the Delivery Crew? Mmm. So sweet and delicious.”

The twenty-nine-year-old ate as if she wanted heartburn, but Gergiev didn’t seem to mind. He’d worked with the woman for eight years now, and very little surprised him. She was the Supreme Leader’s right hand: his press secretary, Lyudmila Kharlova.

Lyudmila had been born into an aristocratic family, and she’d entered a UK university at age eighteen, majoring in political sociology. Upon her return,

she'd worked in the party's communications department. Through this work, she met and helped Gergiev, who'd been just another party member at the time.

When Gergiev was instated as first secretary, Lyudmila became his speechwriter and advisor. She'd also played a role in starting the Nosferatu Project. Besides Lyudmila, there were very few people who could speak so frankly in front of the Union's Supreme Leader.

Gergiev leaned forward and spun the globe on the table between them. "What must we do to make our motherland a great leader of the world?"

The Zirnitra Union had been a poor, developing country in the first half of the century, exploited by its more powerful rivals. With reform, however, the once-meager nation was on the verge of a historical first. Gergiev was intent on climbing higher still—all the way to uncontested leadership—but he doubted one manned spaceflight would get them there.

"There's no doubt that the Mechta Project is a more powerful weapon than nuclear missiles," he said.

Lyudmila laughed. "How silly."

"Hm? You have an idea, then?"

"You want to be a revolutionary hero, do you not?"

"Of course."

"I want that for you too. I want a revolution. The world is so *boring*. We need a revolution that will swallow it all in one gulp—the United Kingdom and the Delivery Crew too. The weapon of choice could very well be N44, don't you think?" Lyudmila licked the sugar from her lips. "The vampire Irina Luminesk. What a wonderful ingredient... One that could be poison or a cure. We should carefully consider just what sort of meal we want her to be part of."

Chapter 4:
Further than the Moon

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

JANUARY 19, evening. When the candidates finished their daily training, they gathered in the Training Center conference room. It was time to announce the results of the graduation exam and who'd been selected for the Mechta Shest. Besides hospitalized and disqualified candidates, there were fourteen hopefuls in the lineup.

Knowing that today was the date of the official announcement, Lev had slept fitfully and woken up multiple times. But he wasn't alone; everyone else looked equally restless.

Lt. Gen. Viktor watched them with a crease in his brow, holding a confidential-stamped document. Not one to mince words, he got straight to the point. "I will first announce the top three names of the Mechta Shest. These three candidates are especially qualified and will be considered for the position of history's first cosmonaut."

The air in the room instantly thickened with tension. Lev stood tall and held his breath.

Lt. Gen. Viktor looked over each candidate and spoke with great importance. "Private Second Class Mikhail Yashin."

"Sir!"

Mikhail took a smooth step forward as Viktor called his name, as though he'd expected this. The candidates waited for the next name.

"Private Second Class Roza Plevitskaya."

"It's an honor, sir."

Roza allowed herself a hint of a smile as she came forward, throwing a competitive glare in Mikhail's direction. Lev felt the fire of their rivalry even from where he stood. Everyone had known that Mikhail and Roza were in the top three. What was most important to the other candidates was who was

next.

“And now, the final name of the top three.”

They waited with bated breath. Some stiffened with nervousness, while others looked down as if they’d already lost. A few puffed up with pride, awaiting their own names. Lev kept his gaze locked on Lt. Gen. Viktor’s eyes. His parachute landing had been perfect. He had done the absolute best he could. Knowing that, he would take the announcement head-on, no matter the results.

Lt. Gen. Viktor cleared his throat, met Lev’s stare, and spoke. “Private Second Class Lev Leps.”

“Huh? Er, I mean, sir!” Lev squeaked in surprise, unable to believe his ears.

The remaining candidates slumped their shoulders and let out sighs of defeat. Lt. Gen. Viktor went on to announce the three reserve members of the team, but Lev was so excited that he barely registered the names. He was one step closer to realizing his dream, and his imagination ran wild.

What would Earth look like from space? Irina had told him it looked like it was covered in a blue veil. How would the launch feel? She’d said it was a heavy pressure. Zero gravity? It was like being tipsy, she’d said, like floating—

“Lev! *Lev!*”

Lt. Gen. Viktor’s enraged bark made Lev jump like a puppet on strings, and he rushed to salute.

“My apologies! What is it, sir?!”

While Lev daydreamed, Lt. Gen. Viktor had called the remaining three names. The team chuckled at Lev’s absentmindedness. Even at a glance, Lt. Gen. Viktor’s annoyance was clear. He heaved a blatant sigh and started again.

“As far as ordinary citizens are concerned, none of you exist. For instance, even if Mikhail is selected to go to space, you are all just air force privates until his return. After the first cosmonaut’s name is announced to the public, the rest of the Mehta Shest will be called by their titles: Cosmonaut #2, Cosmonaut #3, and so on.”

In contrast to the United Kingdom's open communication, the Union refused to let go of its secrecy. Fame didn't particularly excite Lev, but part of him did wish they could step out from the shadows and make their work known.

"Finally, there is one last announcement. This concerns 'life,' and it is extremely important," said Lt. Gen. Viktor, his face growing stern. "The Mehta Shest are to refrain completely from drinking alcohol."

"What?!"

It wasn't just Lev; even the usually cool and calm Mikhail was obviously shocked. Even if the purpose of the alcohol ban was to maintain the cosmonauts' health and improve their self-control, zhizni was their lifeblood. The word literally meant life! This decision felt utterly cruel. Especially during the fierce cold of winter, zhizni was essential.

"You can toast your graduation with soda water," Lt. Gen. Viktor told them, looking completely serious. "I will update you on your new training schedules tomorrow. Dismissed."

With that, Lt. Gen. Viktor turned on his heel and left. Once he was gone, the tension in the room dissipated. All of the feelings that the candidates had held in rose to the surface, making for a much lighter atmosphere. Tears of defeat and words of encouragement alike surged forth. The three reserves celebrated, hugging and shaking hands.

Lev stuck a hand out toward Mikhail and Roza. "Good luck!"

Mikhail and Roza kept their arms crossed.



“The only cosmonaut that history will remember is the first,” Mikhail said, his voice cold. “Everyone else will be forgotten.”

Lev was struck by just how standoffish Mikhail was. “Yeah, I know that...but is it really so important to have your name go down in the history books?”

Irina, the actual first person to go to space, hadn’t been showered in praise and applause. Instead, she was locked in a solitary cell where the military ran tests on her. Lev knew that mentioning her name would only spark animosity, but he had to make his feelings known.

“I’m not gonna say it’s bad to aim for fame or honor,” he went on. “Aren’t we walking the same path, though? I want us to be a team, all running toward the same dream.”

Lev looked around for some sort of acknowledgment, but Roza’s icy glare pinned him in place.

“A honey tongue, a heart of gall. That’s you, Lev,” she said.

That well-known Zirnitrán saying referred to people who said what others wanted to hear while hiding a heart of darkness.

“You’re joking,” Lev said. “Of course I want to be first. Just like you do! But...do we have to be so cold and distant with each other? I just want us to work together. We all share the dream of flying to space...and so do people around the world.”

“How very noble.”

The two candidates shot Lev a last frosty look before they left him alone in the conference room.

“Whatever,” he muttered. “You do you, and I’ll do me.”

The following morning, Lev jogged in the forest by the biomedical laboratory in his usual training clothes. The stars glimmered in the gray dawn, beginning to fade, and it was cold enough to freeze the sweat on someone’s body.

Lev couldn’t go inside the laboratory anymore, so he wanted to catch Irina as

she came back from her tests. He'd look suspicious if he loitered around doing nothing, so he pretended to be training. However, he'd already done four laps around the laboratory, which was suspicious in itself.

"Phew..."

Lev leaned against a snow-covered pine, catching his breath. In truth, he didn't even know if Irina was still staying in the solitary cells. She might have been transferred without notice. He looked at his watch; it was five thirty. In half an hour, his first day as a bona fide cosmonaut would begin.

"Maybe I should head back..." he said, looking away as he prepared to give up. "Oh!"

He'd spotted Irina and Anya walking along the path toward him.

"Hey! Over here!" he shouted, waving as he ran up to them.

Irina and Anya eyed Lev with some suspicion.

"What are you doing?" Irina asked.

Lev smiled knowingly, then threw his freezing hand out into a peace sign. "I passed the graduation exam, and I made the top three! I wanted to tell you first."

"What? Really?! Congra—" Irina's mouth started growing into a smile, and she was about to clap excitedly, but just as quickly she caught herself. She pursed her lips, erased all emotion from her face, and crossed her arms arrogantly. "I appreciate the report. And?"

"Were you just about to clap?"

"No."

Anya held in her laughter and poked Lev's arm. "Iriyan here was so worried. She couldn't stop asking me about your exam over and over. She was all like, 'I wonder how it went? I hope he gets through.'"

"Huh?" Lev's eyes widened in astonishment.

"Whaaat?! Could you *not* go blabbing your ridiculousness? I was *not* worried, not even a little. You were hearing things!" Irina's cry pierced the silence of the

early morning. It echoed through the forest, making the snow-bedecked branches quiver. “If you ask me, *you* should be the one getting your head examined, Anya!”

In the midst of her tantrum, the vampire girl stomped her foot...and huge clumps of snow and ice fell from the pine tree above, landing right on top of her.

“What the—?!”

Irina leaped back in shock, only to lose her footing on the icy ground and fall butt-first in the sludgy snow.

“Ow... What happened?”

At that moment, a pine cone dropped down and whacked Irina on the head, as if to punctuate the whole ordeal.

“Ack!”

The pine cone rolled along the ground. Lev and Anya watched in shock.

Irina was still confused as Lev reached out a hand. “You okay?”

She did not take his hand and instead looked around, putting the situation all together. When she realized what had transpired, her face went bright red, and she sprang to her feet without Lev’s help. She wiped her muddy hands on her clothes and acted as if nothing had happened.

“Well then,” she said, “I suppose, if they have to send a human into space, I’m glad it’s you...”

She was not nearly as composed as she pretended, and when Lev thought of her worrying about his exam results, warmth rose to melt the chill in his body.

Once Irina calmed a little, she hesitantly asked Lev a question, twisting the saturated fabric of her pants. “So, when do you fly?”

“They haven’t decided yet. You see...” Lev told Irina and Anya about the schedule still being in flux and how he was competing with Mikhail and Roza.

“Them again...” Irina muttered disdainfully. She looked up and stared Lev in the eye, as if she had something important to say. The light of the rising sun

flickered in her scarlet irises.

“What is it?” he asked her.

“Nothing. Just...give it your best. Don’t lose to them.” A certain loneliness wavered in Irina’s gaze, and then she walked straight past Lev.

“Is this how you want things to end?” Anya called. Irina stopped, frozen. “You might not see each other again.”

Irina didn’t respond with a grand gesture of any kind. Instead, she looked down silently.

Discomfort welled up in Lev’s heart. “What do you mean, we might not see each other again?”

“Irina is being transferred to Sangrad as of January 22.”

“But that’s...the day after tomorrow...” Lev had known the transfer was coming, but his heart wrenched at the abruptness of it. “How long will she be there?”

“We still aren’t sure.”

Lev asked Anya to tell him everything she knew. Unfortunately, all she had was the transfer date. He wanted to ask her about Irina’s design bureau position, but it was strictly confidential; Anya could say nothing about it.

Irina kept quiet, staring at the snowy pine cone on the ground. Even if Lev told her not to go, the decision was final. It could not be overturned. Still, Lev hated the idea of ending on a gloomy note, so he walked to Irina and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Let’s have our own little farewell party tomorrow,” he said.

The next day happened to be a public holiday. It was National Military Day, and everything would be closed, including in LAIKA44.

Irina slowly turned her head toward him, but her eyes were downcast as she answered. “I don’t need a...farewell party. But if it was a party to celebrate passing the exam, then maybe I’d consider it...”

Lev cocked his head. “You mean for me?” Irina’s unexpected suggestion

flustered him.

“You’re in agreement, right, Anya?” said Irina, looking to the girl for support.

But Anya shook her head firmly. “I’m sorry. I have plans to go see the commemoration parade in Sangrad, so you two should have the party without me.”

“Huh? Wh-what are you talking about?! You were the one who said, ‘Let’s make sure we have a great time on your last night in LAIKA44.’ You kicked up a whole fuss about it!”

Anya grinned at Irina. “Perhaps you were...hearing things? But really, have a great time, you two!”

“B-but my transfer is tomorrow! If you go to Sangrad, you’ll never make it back in time, right?”

“I’ll be fine. The parade finishes at noon. If I leave right away, I’ll still make it. I’ll just be a bit late, that’s all.”

“Hunh...” Irina shifted her gaze to Lev, her eyes darting left and right, as if she was unsure of herself.

“Well, I mean, I don’t mind still having a party,” Lev said.

“Wha...?”

“Then it’s decided!” Anya cut in, pulling Irina along with her right hand and waving at Lev with the left. “Boy, it sure is getting cold, isn’t it? Irinyan, we should head back. Bye, Lev!”

“Hang on a minute. We haven’t even decided where and when to meet!”

Lev tried to stop them, but Anya continued to drag Irina away. “Tomorrow at six, under these pine trees! I’ll leave the rest up to you!”

“Anya!” said Irina. “What right do you have to decide?!”

“I’m your supervisor!”

The two girls left like a passing storm. A look of joy and embarrassment briefly crossed Irina’s face as they went. The idea of spending time with her the night before she left made Lev happy, but it also filled him with loneliness.

Lev arrived at the pine trees about ten minutes early. Perhaps Moroz knew it was a holiday too, since the north wind was light and the ice on the trees melted down in droplets. It was still cold, though, and Lev was wrapped in a thick overcoat.

The other cosmonauts had gone to Sangrad to see the parade, just like Anya. It was a voluntary event, so Lev's absence wouldn't matter. Still, if they knew he used the time to meet Irina, Lev had a feeling they'd look at him with disdain.

None of that made a difference to Lev. He wanted to see her.

The church bells rang out from the town center to mark the arrival of six o'clock. At almost the exact same time, Irina's face peeked from the shadows of the trees. She was draped in the same poncho she'd worn when they went to the jazz bar together, along with her necklace and a drawstring pouch.

Lev waved gently. "Hey."

"Morning..."

Right then, he realized that their respective internal clocks had shifted. "Oh, yeah. Good morning."

It had been some time since the two were alone together, and a peculiar nervousness hung over them.

"So, what do you want to do?" Lev asked.

"Didn't Anya say she'd leave it up to you?"

"Well, why don't we try the jazz bar first?" Lev couldn't drink, but he figured they could at least chat over some music.

"Sounds good. I've wanted to go back for a while." Irina's cute fangs flashed in her grin.

The city streets were practically deserted, and most shops were closed. Even the chimney smoke that was common around this time of year was mostly nonexistent. Evidently, the majority of the citizens had gone to see the parade. Irina looked at the silver birches with a certain listless gloom.

“Have you been doing well?” Lev asked her.

“The tests are all fine. But what about you? How’s your knee?”

“Fully healed!” Lev gave his knee a couple of slaps.

Irina smiled. “Great.”

Lev was relieved to find that Irina was still herself. She kept up her haughty attitude for the most part, but every now and then, the kinder side of her personality slipped out. He was also relieved that she was getting along well with Anya, her new supervisor, who would go with her to Sangrad. He couldn’t completely quash his worries, but he knew he’d only ruin the mood if he asked Irina too much about that.

Tonight, he just wanted to have fun. He had to make up for all the time they hadn’t been able to spend together.

The jazz bar was closed.

“Talk about poor planning. Is this how you intend to see me off?” Irina asked, pouting.

“Sorry... Hey, wait a second. This isn’t a *farewell* party, right? Didn’t you say it was to celebrate my exam results?”

“Huh?”

“I suggested a farewell party, but then you said—”

“Why are you getting so caught up in the nitty-gritty, huh?! So maybe I did, um, say something about an exam celebration!”

Irina took her frustrations out on the pouch in her hands, yanking the drawstring tightly closed.

“If you close it that tight, you won’t be able to open it...”

“You don’t know that,” she snapped, drawing her lips thin and hiding the pouch behind her back.

“So, uh...let’s look for another place, then.”

Irina followed Lev silently through the residential sector, where they saw a poster at the theater. It was for *The Grand Space Voyage*, a science fiction film. The poster showed a spaceship along with the tagline “CARRYING THE DREAMS OF HUMANITY THROUGH THE DEPTHS OF SPACE...AND TO THE MOON!”

“What?! Look! What is this?!” Irina cried excitedly, breaking her silence. She hopped up and down in front of the poster. “Who went to the moon?! When?! Are they lying?!”

“I mean, they are, but...”

“It’s a lie?!”

Her eyes whirled with confusion. She had no idea what movies were. Where she came from, they didn’t even have television sets. Lev took a little time to explain how they worked.

“I want to see it,” Irina declared, staring at the spaceship on the poster with ample curiosity.

Lev was giddy just imagining how she might react to the movie’s special effects. He’d already seen the movie, but he pretended he hadn’t. “Then let’s check it out. It looks fun.”

He paid for two tickets, bought some birch juice and popcorn, and escorted her into the theater. The movie was just about to start, and there were no other viewers. Lev and Irina had the whole place to themselves.

“You’ll get the best view in the middle, but sit wherever you like,” Lev told her, taking a seat in the center.

Puzzled, Irina looked around, then did a lap of the whole theater to examine every nook and cranny. In the end, she plopped down next to Lev.

“I have come to the conclusion that this is the best place to watch the movie,” she said. “You just happen to be right next to me.”

Lev wondered why she always needed to make excuses, and he grinned in spite of himself. “Hmm? Oh, okay. Sure.”

The lights dimmed, and a buzzer rang to indicate the start of the movie. Irina rocked to attention. “Wh-what?! Are we under attack?!”

“Relax. The movie’s about to start.”

A grand trumpet sounded as a spaceship appeared on the screen.

“Whoa!” Irina leaped to her feet, gripping the seat in front of her as she leaned forward. “That’s incredible! Is it real? It’s flying!”

It was all Lev could do to hold in his laughter. Her reaction was well beyond anything he could have imagined.

Irina dashed to the front row to touch the screen, then all the way to the back of the theater to look at the projector. “Ugh, it’s so bright!”

The screen filled with Irina’s shadow, but she didn’t seem to mind. Lev was suddenly glad they had the whole place to themselves. Having gotten some of the initial excitement out of her system, Irina returned to her seat to watch the film just as the introductory narration began.

“When the Zirnitra Union’s spaceship heads out on the first-ever manned moon expedition, the crew discovers a United Kingdom vessel in distress. They rescue the ship, but doing so leaves them dangerously low on fuel. Can they make it home safely?”

Basically, it was a propaganda film that made the Union look superior to its rival, the United Kingdom. On-screen, the Union’s top scientists and cosmonauts put together a spaceship from a base in outer space and took off for the moon. With their superior scientific knowledge, they landed without issue. The lunar landscape was depicted as rough, rugged, and mountainous.

“Is that really what the moon looks like?” Irina asked Lev.

“It’s how the moviemakers imagine it. Nobody has ever actually seen it.”

Irina watched the screen with a studious expression. “That bright-red star... Is that Mars?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“It looks like the sun. I wonder if it’s really like that...”

As she gripped the popcorn tight in her hand, Irina’s eyes sparkled with childlike innocence. Seeing it reminded Lev of feelings he’d forgotten. He remembered how excited he was the first time he saw an encyclopedia of

astronomy, the joy of drawing rockets he designed by himself for trips into space, and what it was like watching a movie for the first time.

“Aah! They’re going to crash!” Irina’s hands shot into the air at the on-screen crisis, and popcorn flew everywhere. “Huh?! Oh, sorry!”

Lev laughed. “Don’t worry. You keep watching, and I’ll pick up the popcorn.”

He took the box from Irina and picked up stray bits of popcorn. Irina was fiery, passionate, and completely drawn in. It was as if she were starring in the film herself.

“Oh no! Did they run out of fuel? Will they be okay?” She clasped her hands in front of her chest to pray for the fictional cosmonauts. “You can make it! Just a little further!”

It was only a movie, but Lev still found it uncanny to see Irina root for humans. Perhaps the grand dream of space exploration went beyond their difference in species.

Finally, the on-screen cosmonauts made it safely back to Earth, where cheers and applause from the whole world greeted them.

“Yes! They did it!”

Irina’s applause echoed through the theater. When he saw how happy she looked, Lev once again realized that her accomplishment was worthy of its own film. Upon *her* return, she’d been met by a meager thirty people to celebrate, and the members of the Delivery Crew hadn’t even cracked smiles.

It bothered Lev that Irina, history’s first real cosmonaut, would never be known to the public.

By the time Lev and Irina left the theater, night had fallen.

Irina still glowed with excitement. “Lev, what do you think life on Mars looks like?”

“They say it’s bacteria, but I can’t even imagine it.”

According to well-known scientists who had analyzed the available data, life

on Mars was a very real possibility. Two giant rocks orbiting the planet, Phobos and Deimos, had been discovered less than a hundred years ago. Academics hotly debated whether these were artificial satellites launched by intelligent life-forms residing on the planet. Whenever Lev thought of a future where humans could travel space to confirm that for themselves, he was full of excitement.

Lev and Irina walked the mostly abandoned city, lost in talk of space and the stars above.

“I wonder if trips through space would really be like the one in that movie...” Irina murmured.

Some said that when manned spaceflights became a reality, the future would be one of travels between stars. A number of scientists suggested raising goats on board long-term flights as livestock to feed passengers.

“They really come up with some amazing ideas,” Lev mused. “I guess it’s possible. In theory, at least.”

“You really think so?” Irina didn’t look convinced.

“The goat’s waste would feed a specific alga, the alga feeds the goats, and we feed on the goat milk. It’d be a cycle.” Lev couldn’t really believe what he was saying either, however.

“Humans definitely come up with weird ideas, don’t they?”

As they walked, the vending machine they had once frequented came into view.

“Well, you love soda water, right? That’s a human idea,” Lev pointed out. “That first time you tried it, you dropped your cup in surprise. You were all, ‘My tongue, it’s numb! It’s numb!’”

He imitated Irina’s first soda water experience, sticking his tongue out and clawing at his throat.

“Enough! I don’t even remember it!” Irina stormed off in a huff. Lev had only meant it jokingly, but he’d angered her.

“W-wait! I’m sorry! Don’t get so mad about it!”

“You’re getting along well with your teammates, right?” Irina said, vague annoyance clear on her face. “Even *her*...”

The way she said it, there was only one person she could be talking about.

“You mean Roza? Why bring her up all of a sudden?”

“You’re training together.”

“I mean, yeah. We’re teammates.”

“And you’re drinking soda water together.”

“Uh, yeah...”

Irina gave Lev a sidelong glance. “And you’re doing tandem parachute jumps, holding hands.”

“Huh? We are *not* doing that. What’s this about?”

“It’s nothing...” Irina looked away.

Lev yearned to know why she’d brought Roza up so suddenly, but he could tell by Irina’s demeanor that asking would only make her angrier. Still, the truth of the matter was that Roza had put a firm wall between herself and Lev.

To lighten the mood, Lev decided to change the subject to dinner, which he’d mulled over all day. He couldn’t take Irina to the fancy restaurant people usually used for farewell parties because she couldn’t taste anything. If Lev were the only one enjoying the meal, that wouldn’t make anyone happy.

He’d also considered going to eat dinner at the lakeside, where they could spend time alone just staring up at the night sky. It would be cold, but certainly more comfortable for Irina than being surrounded by humans in a restaurant. Thus, Lev had filled a bag with snacks, a milk bottle, rye bread, and—as a parting gift—the most expensive chocolate he could find in LAIKA44. He’d thought long and hard about getting Irina some kind of jewelry or accessory, but he had ultimately decided that he wasn’t buying a gift for a lover and felt food was more appropriate.

“For dinner, well... It won’t exactly be a picnic, but I brought some food with me. There are benches and tables by the lakeside, so how about we eat there?”

“Yes, okay.”

Lev was relieved that Irina didn't demand they go to a restaurant.

It was after nine when they arrived at the lake. The movie had taken up a lot of their time, and Lev's dorm curfew was ten, so he and Irina had less than an hour left together. Lev wanted to be back before the others returned from the parade. His position was different now that he was on the cosmonaut team; he couldn't stay with Irina until morning.

He explained this to Irina, who shrugged in disinterest and muttered, “Okay...”

“All right, then. Let's eat!”

They sat side by side under the dim glow of a street lamp. Lev lined up the food he'd brought on the wooden table while Irina struggled with the pouch she'd carried with her.

“Hm?”

When Lev looked closer, he realized Irina was trying to open the pouch but couldn't because she'd closed it so tightly earlier.

“I told you that would happen.”

“I can open it,” Irina said, but she was fighting the pouch cord so hard she could have torn off her own fingernails. “Ow...”

“Give it here for a second. There's a trick to knots. I learned about them back when I was a cadet.”

Irina tried to force the pouch open for a little longer, then gave up. She looked away and passed the pouch to Lev in silence. He fiddled with the knot, and it untied easily.

“See?” He held the pouch out to Irina, but she didn't take it. “What's wrong?”

“Open it,” she said. “Look inside...” Her voice was laced with bashfulness, and she still couldn't hold his gaze.

Lev did as he was told, and inside the pouch was a plastic container full of aspic, a savory meat jelly.

“Oh, wow...” he put the container on the table, took the lid off, and looked at the aspic. “You made this?”

Irina’s cheeks flushed red. She nodded. “Anya said it was something people made for celebrations.”

“Thank you!”

“D-don’t worry about it. Just eat it.” Irina once again took the pouch in her hands and pulled its drawstrings tight as if to hide her embarrassment inside.

The table was set with a simple array of food to celebrate their combined farewell and congratulatory dinner. The rye bread was rock-hard, and the aspic was ice-cold. All the same, Lev was happy to have something Irina had made herself.

“I’m going to start with the aspic,” he said, popping some into his mouth. “Wow, it’s good!”

It was frigid, but he had no complaints about the taste.

Irina, who watched him the whole time, let out a sigh of relief. “Really? That’s good. I don’t understand flavor, so I was worried about it.”

“Oh, right. Now that you mention it...how *did* you flavor it?”

Irina took a bit of the aspic herself and explained how Anya had helped her the whole time, tasting the aspic over and over until her stomach was about to burst, and how they’d finally gotten the flavor correct. Lev knew he was devouring that very same aspic he’d had in the cafeteria, but Irina’s story made him feel like he was eating a whole other dish. Something akin to melancholy swirled within him.

“This...chocolate... It smells really nice.”

Lev watched Irina lick a piece of the chocolate. Even if she was a little different from humans, she was still just another girl. But what world would accept her? Where in the vast reaches of space was a world that would welcome this girl, who didn’t put on arrogant airs even after a historic first journey through space? Who went to great lengths just to make him good food?

Irina gulped down some milk rhythmically. Lev chewed a piece of bread frozen so solid it threatened to shatter his teeth. He wondered what to talk about; there was just too much, and he didn't know where to start.

They went on eating without much in the way of conversation, and then split the last piece of chocolate. Its rich aroma and sweet taste filled Lev's mouth. In the cold, starry night, a fantastic aurora of bluish-green floated through the sky.

Irina felt her heart race, and she quietly closed her eyes. "I saw the aurora... from space. It was like a curtain over Earth..."

The freezing night winds blew through Irina's black hair. The lunny kamen around her neck sparkled blue as it reflected the brilliant moonlight. The chocolate on her tongue melted into gentle, ephemeral sweetness. The moon rose higher into the sky as the moment of their parting grew ever closer. Lev wanted to say something, anything, and he started to open his mouth.

Just then, Irina opened her eyes and spoke. "Um..."

"Hm?"

"I-It's about what's going to happen after the tests at the hospital..."

"Right. The design bureau thing?"

"Uh..." Irina looked away, lost in a moment of hesitation. She stared at a pine cone rolling along the frozen surface of the lake. "Wouldn't it be great if a rocket I helped design took you to the moon one day?"

"Yeah." Lev had been looking at the stars, but now he was worried about Irina's downcast expression. "It's true, right?" he pressed. "About the design bureau?"

Irina gasped and looked straight at him.

"Uh, don't get me wrong. I'm not calling you a liar, it's just... The Union's top brass sometimes have tongues of honey, so to speak. There's a history of telling lies." Lev smiled apologetically.

Irina held his gaze. "It's true."

"Then I'm glad. Sorry."

“But don’t worry about me. Your job is to become the first cosmonaut. You have to do it.”

“Of course. Wouldn’t want you sucking all my blood and turning me into a mummy.”

“Mm...”

Their conversation once more dropped into silence, but not because Lev was at a loss for what to say. The fierce, sudden desire that filled him now gave him goosebumps.

I want her to suck my blood.

He couldn’t explain it logically. It was instinctive. Before they parted, he wanted to taste that sweet pain just one more time. But he couldn’t bring himself to speak the words. He’d given her his blood previously because the circumstances had called for it. He glanced at Irina—at her soft, wet lips and the fangs peeking out from them.

Not from my arm. I want her to bite my neck.

Lev’s heart began to race, pumping blood throughout his body. He felt hot all over, and as he sat entranced by Irina’s face, she suddenly turned to him. The sight of her scarlet eyes shocked him, and he quickly averted his gaze. Irina did the same. He wondered if he should just say out loud that they might not meet again.

As the thought struck him, her name left his lips. “Irina...”

At the sound of her own name, she looked at him with her unfathomable eyes. Her cheeks went red, and she looked older somehow. Their eyes locked. Neither of them turned away. Lev’s gaze fell to Irina’s cute lips. Her mouth opened ever so slightly, her tongue lapping at her fangs. Her breath came out white in the cold. Blood pulsed hard through Lev’s body. Could he ask her? Could he really do it?

He edged closer to her, facing her now and feeling as though he were being pulled into her eyes. His fingers brushed her hand, which still rested on the wooden bench. She shivered.

“Irina, just one more time, I...” If he asked the question, there was no turning back. He would have gone over the edge.

Just then, Irina’s eyes widened, and she looked suddenly flustered. The inviting expression on her face vanished instantly, and she rose to her feet.

“Your friends are coming,” she said, staring into the darkness.

“Huh?” Lev jumped up in a rush, but he couldn’t make anything out in the dark. Unlike him, Irina had night vision.

“You don’t want to be seen with me, right?” Her eyes wavered for a fleeting, fragile moment. “I’m sorry...that I’m a vampire.”

As Irina expressed her pain openly, permitting it to slip beyond her haughty air, Lev’s heart bled. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You should be proud of yourself.”

“But—”

She was on the verge of tears, and Lev couldn’t contain his emotions any longer. He put his hand on her shoulder and pulled her into his arms.

“Ah...”

For a moment, Irina tensed with shock, but then she relaxed into Lev’s chest. He could feel the thin line of her body, unlike the time he had held her in her space suit. He hated that he was powerless to do anything for her on his own, even as she fought so hard.



“Lev, they’re coming...” Irina wrenched herself free and stared at him with teary eyes. “I’ll be okay, so just focus on what’s ahead. We’ll meet again when you’re a cosmonaut...”

“That’s a promise. Hang in there, Irina.” Lev hid the pain of parting behind a smile, his eyes on hers.

“I will,” Irina said. “Bye, Lev.”

Her voice wavered, as if she was trying to swallow back her tears. She grabbed her pouch and ran away without so much as a sound. A few moments later, Lev heard the voices of his teammates come from the shadows.

“Lev? Is that you? What are you doing here?”

Lev turned to them casually, as if nothing were out of the ordinary at all. “All the shops were closed... You know, I wish I went to the parade with you guys.”

The feeling of Irina wrapped in his arms lingered throughout his body.

Black Dragon’s Eyes

• очи цирнитра •

THE FEBRUARY SKIES of Sangrad were heavy, as if lightly covered in ink. Near the Neglin, which sat at the heart of the city, was a chalky white nine-story building: the Military Institute of Medical Science.

Two weeks had passed since Irina was admitted to the hospital for testing. She’d been placed in a luxurious top-floor room reserved for VIPs in need of private or otherwise confidential medical treatment. The room was furnished with a television, a refrigerator, and an air conditioner. Even the coffin installed as a bed replacement was of the highest quality. It was heaven compared to the cramped space Irina was used to in her solitary cell.

Everything was set up to keep Irina’s stress levels low, but her body was still covered in pads to collect data, and Delivery Crew agents were on guard at the doors outside. Put simply, she was little more than a bird in a very fancy cage.

The examinations were not so different from those she went through at LAIKA44, and she underwent physical exams daily. Those in charge of the testing called her not “Irina,” but “N44.” They were fully committed to treating her as a test subject.

Anya felt ashamed to be part of the examinations. She had not been called upon as a scientist but rather as Irina’s companion. Her presence was crucial to Irina, though; Anya was an important medicine for keeping her mental state stable.

The night before her transfer, Irina had said goodbye to Lev and returned to her cell alone. She’d been so full of uncertainty that she burst into tears. She’d managed to convince him that she was becoming an engineer, but in her heart, she was wailing.

Save me... I don’t want to be disposed of.

Let’s defect together to some other country.

Put me on a rocket and take me to the moon.

She had bottled up all the things she’d wanted to say and held them back, knowing they’d only make things awkward. Her heart felt like it would break into pieces at the thought that she and Lev might never meet again. She wanted to touch him, to be held in his arms, and to drink his blood. She felt chills when their hands touched, and she wanted him, his blood, and every cell in his body. Perhaps he would have let her devour him.

The hunger had nearly overtaken her, but the arrival of the other cosmonauts had jolted her out of her sweet dream back into reality. In that moment, she’d deeply regretted being a vampire—and, much to her own surprise, she’d apologized for it. Lev had hugged her then, surely because of how pitiful she looked. The only balm for her soul was the small comfort that Lev had believed her statement that she would be moved to the design bureau.

When Anya had returned later that same night, Irina flashed a grin and thanked her, telling her how much Lev had enjoyed the aspic they made. Still, the vampire’s eyes were so puffy and red that Anya must have seen through her facade. All the same, Anya simply smiled and said, “I’m just glad I could help.” She didn’t ask even one thing more about Irina’s night with Lev, instead opting

to talk about the parade. Irina was grateful for the kindness, and she wished she could overcome this crybaby inside her the same way she'd overcome her fear of heights.

The clock tower rang to mark five o'clock in the evening, and Irina and Anya went on their scheduled walk. That was their one chance during the day to leave the hospital, but it was purely for what the doctors called "health maintenance," so the young women were not allowed any freedom. They had been ordered to confine their course to the outer rim of the Neglin, and Delivery Crew agents disguised as ordinary citizens tailed them.

The hospital had prepared Irina's clothing. She wore a fur coat from the state-managed department store with a tartan dress. The outfit was meant to help her fit in, so she'd look like any other citizen. Irina hated dressing as one of the Union's humans, but it wasn't like she could go about her life in her underwear, so she begrudgingly went along with the order. This was the life she now lived, complete with invisible collar, and it brought her and Anya across the Grand City Square.

The square was easily large enough to fit at least two hundred thousand people, and it was full of citizens and tourists coming and going. Nearby, radio towers continuously broadcast annoying national propaganda. This area was also the proud home of a stone mausoleum where the founder of the Union had been laid to rest. The national museum flew the Union flag proudly. Sangrad was a brighter, more open city than LAIKA44, but Irina still felt suffocated by it.

She and Anya left the square, picking up the smell of coal from steamboats chugging through city canals. Fir needles swayed in the breeze, and ducks swam lazily on the surface of the water. This was the one spot in the whole city that had a place in Irina's heart.

"Phew..." Irina and Anya took a seat on a nearby bench for a short break.

Anya began talking about some things she'd heard around the hospital. "They say the United Kingdom had a successful test flight with a chimpanzee in place of a human."

As part of its manned spaceflight program, Project Hermes, the United Kingdom had launched a rocket carrying Chimpanzee #65 on January 30. Faulty equipment brought the animal to the brink of death, but still, it made a safe return. The chimpanzee, which had the human name Sam, was praised throughout the world. Chimpanzees were much closer to humans than dogs, but they were still animals, so no media organizations announced Sam as history's first cosmonaut.

A chimpanzee had gone on a flight not unlike Irina's own and come back to a public announcement and showers of praise. That same chimpanzee received its own name, while Irina was labeled N44. Irina had conflicting feelings about the whole thing, but her heart ached most when she realized she was comparing herself to a chimpanzee. She kept her feelings private as she listened to Anya.

"They don't use dhampirs in their tests in the United Kingdom?" Irina asked eventually.

"Iriyan, you really don't know what's going on over there, do you?"

Irina had lived her life outside human society, so she wasn't particularly versed in world politics.

"Well, I know enough to know there are dhampir out there."

"The United Kingdom's different from the Union, though. If they even tried a test subject like that, the dhampirs would riot."

"Dhampir" was the name given to those with both human and Nosferatu blood. They did not exist in the Zirnitra Union, but they had carved out independence and prosperity in the United Kingdom. Their history was separate from the so-called "purebloods" of the Union, and thus had no connection to Irina herself.

In the middle of the sixteenth century, when the Nosferatu suffered brutal oppression after the church blamed them for the Black Death, about a hundred vampires had fled the Union by boat for the lands of Arnack. They learned to live with people of a completely different religion, and some of those relationships begat half-blooded children. As generations passed, the dhampirs' aversion to sunlight and resistance to cold weakened, but they retained the

Nosferatu's physical characteristics: pointy ears, fangs, and blood-red eyes.

Still, Arnack was not a utopia for the dhampir, who were far outnumbered by humans who branded them "sullied" and enslaved them. In that way, the dhampir too were oppressed over hundreds of years. As the dhampirs' homes and numbers grew larger, conflicts between them and the people of Arnack heated up, resulting in countless confrontations. In recent years, relations had soured to the point that fights became almost commonplace.

At the start of the year, three dhampir students looking to celebrate the New Year had been denied entrance to a bar. They sat in front of the bar in protest, but the drunken humans inside lynched and murdered them. This event sent shock waves through the country, causing huge problems throughout the United Kingdom.

"A few dhampirs are involved in the UK's space development program," said Anya. "But none were selected as part of the Hermes Seven, so they're not being made an active part of the project."

"Oh..."

Irina couldn't help but wonder what would have happened to her if she'd been born in the United Kingdom. She almost certainly wouldn't have made it into space, and she never would have met Lev either.

Lev...

Even when she tried to forget him, his memory kept on coming back, along with memories of the time they spent together. When Irina imagined how his training was going, she felt a pang of guilt at having lied to him. Tears threatened to spill, and she raised her eyes toward the sky. Above the canals, she saw the pale moon and the gentle onset of night.

At the sight of the moon, though, Irina averted her gaze. Something in her heart itched whenever she saw it, and her breath caught in her throat. The necklace she had so treasured now felt like it choked her, so she'd hidden it on a shelf in her hospital room.

Sometime amid all that, Irina had completely stopped chanting the poem of the moon.

Chapter 5: A Cold Spring

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

WHO WILL BE SELECTED as history's first-ever cosmonaut?

That was the topic that coiled around the Mechta Shest every single day. Then February 20 arrived. Lev, Mikhail, and Roza underwent a special training regimen. Still, none of them knew anything about how the first cosmonaut would be selected or what form the announcement might take. On top of that, all they knew of the launch was that it would be held in spring.

Left completely in the dark, Lev diligently went about his training. But whenever he settled in to sleep or took a break during the day, he thought back to his last night with Irina. As time passed and he came to his senses, he was shocked at his desire for her to suck his blood. He was glad he had never actually asked her to bite his neck. Furthermore, he couldn't even be sure she didn't hate him now that he'd gotten wrapped up in his emotions and hugged her. His palms grew sweaty whenever he thought about it.

Nevertheless, the idea that Irina was doing her best to get through her examinations so she could become an engineer encouraged him, and it made him want to try *his* best too. Right now, he was ranked third beneath Mikhail and Roza, but he still remembered Irina's words. "*We'll meet again when you're a cosmonaut.*" That promise was carved into his heart, and it propelled him toward his goal of space.

As expected of such a tough rival, Mikhail performed all his training perfectly, displayed leadership qualities, and constantly showed Lt. Gen. Viktor how exceptional he was. There was a feeling in the air that nobody could object in the slightest if Mikhail were selected. Nobody knew whether Lt. Gen. Viktor actually had a say in the selection, but there was no one else for them to show

off to.

On the other hand, some pointed out that Roza had a distinct size advantage, since the cabin itself had strict weight limitations. True to her nickname, “the White Rose of Sangrad,” people were also drawn to Roza’s beauty. At the same time, many gossiped that it was unthinkable for a woman to become history’s first cosmonaut. The Union touted its gender equality, and compared to other countries, women did have higher rank. Still, in a male-dominated military system, it was difficult for some to imagine her being selected.

Roza had to be aware of that inequality, but she never once tried to suck up to Lt. Gen. Viktor. As if to reject the rumors floating around, she remained incredibly stoic and strict, even during meals. Just like Irina, she could be powerfully aggressive, but what differentiated them was that Roza never showed a single sign of weakness.

“She’s beautiful, but no way would she work as a girlfriend,” a reserve team member whispered.

“Did you say something?” Roza asked, impaling him with an icy gaze.

While Mikhail and Roza battled it out for the position of top dog, Lev trained as best he could, trying not to lose the cheerful nature he’d had ever since he began as a cosmonaut candidate. He joked plenty with his teammates.

“Sometimes I just don’t get that guy...”

A handful of the others envied Lev at first, then slowly began cheering him on as they came to understand his nature. He always did his best, and he never acted like he was better than anyone else.

While the top three trained for launch, they were presented with flight logs from the Nosferatu Project. These were not copies of typewritten reports but photocopies of the very logs Irina wrote during her flight.

Lev caressed the log and opened it as gingerly as if he were handling a treasure. “Ah...”

When he saw Irina’s rounded script, angled toward the upper right of the

page, it reminded him of their study sessions together. He was supposed to be her tutor, but she'd never had questions and instead silently read and took notes on her own.

Even now, while she and Lev were so far apart that they couldn't see each other, Irina always took up a small corner of his heart. It felt as if their roles had been reversed, and now Irina was the teacher. She had been a literal pioneer of space development. Lev scanned the pages of the flight log, but there wasn't anything new that he hadn't already heard from Irina herself.

It was a different story for Mikhail and Roza, though. Mikhail read the document closely, nodding as he stroked his chin. Roza also read it diligently, but she obviously wasn't happy about it—her brow furrowed, and she sighed with each turn of the page.

One section of the flight log in particular had a big impact on their training. Before reaching zero gravity, Irina had lost consciousness, which was considered unacceptable for the first official launch. The cosmonaut had to remain conscious from start to finish. The data revealed that Irina's heartrate had risen to abnormal levels, indicating that her small frame had been under significant load stress.

In her meeting with the central committee, Irina had reported, *"Training under Sagalevich was awful, but in the end, it proved helpful."*

Thus, it was decided that the cosmonauts would be put through even higher levels of stress than Irina had experienced to prepare their bodies for launch. Military medical staff would be on hand for this training, and every precaution was taken, but there was no escaping how strange the exercises were in and of themselves.

"You will sit in a special machine that will send you hurtling at a stone wall at a hundred kilometers an hour."

"Excuse me?"

Lev couldn't believe his ears. However, the level of shock the machine produced equaled the load on a cosmonaut at launch, so the training went ahead.

“Grh!”

The sheer acceleration pushed against your eyes, crushing your ears, cheeks, and face. At the point of impact, your body flew from the seat for just an instant, then was hit by a bone-breaking impact.

Roza’s beautiful features twisted in discomfort. “Hrk!” It was torture for her delicate frame, but she gritted her teeth and saw it through.

This dangerous trial could not simply be given to the cosmonaut team without prior testing. Independent of Lev and the cosmonauts, there was a group of about ten military personnel dubbed “testers.” These testers had been invited to help support the space program, after which they were secretly made subjects for experimentation. They were subjected to hundreds of tests that pushed the human body to its very limits. Many could not take it, but all gave up their bodies for the motherland.

Lev’s heart ached when he found out about the testers, but he also realized that it was a cosmonaut’s duty to bear the passion and bravery of those people.

Outside of shock training, other experimental exercises awaited. One was the “zero-grav elevator,” which dropped from an extreme height onto a special cushioned surface. It was an incredibly large-scale piece of machinery that resulted in just a few seconds of a floating sensation. Another was the “noise bath,” a room equipped with a giant speaker that played a recording of a rocket launch at a hundred times its normal volume. It was one hour of hell at a volume so loud that even hands clamped tight over your ears couldn’t block it.

Even though he doubted the actual efficacy of the strange new training methods, Lev still saw them through with a smile.

“You know,” he said jokingly, “I do feel stronger.”

However, Mikhail was not so good-natured. Once he completed the training, he made his feelings clear to the supervising engineer. “This is ridiculous.”

In many ways, he was right. There was little point to breaking the cosmonaut’s minds and bodies through training that didn’t guarantee the desired effects. At the same time, he knew that asking them to lessen the severity of the training might come off as cowardice, making him seem

unsuitable for spaceflight.

“The test subject might have lost consciousness, but I won’t,” Mikhail added.

Mikhail was nothing if not confident. He was a proud young man from a well-off family, truly one of the elite.

Lev wasn’t particularly self-assured around his type, having been brought up on a farm way out in the countryside, but all the same he tried to stay positive. “Don’t be like that, Mikhail. Let’s focus on getting through this.”

Lev was just being himself. Even though the training exhausted them all and stole their appetites, he told jokes to lighten the mood.

“What if we opened the training to people who wanted to lose weight?” He laughed. “Maybe they’d line up for it.”

Even the engineers who ran the training on-site relaxed at Lev’s smile. Just like the cosmonauts, they were also reaching into the unknown. Everything was an exploration.

Mikhail couldn’t believe Lev’s optimism. “You can laugh through all this?”

“When I realize that I might go to space, I’m reenergized.”

However, Mikhail cut him down with his reply. “Who said *you* were going?”

“Well, I mean, a guy can dream, right?”

Roza stayed out of the conversation. She didn’t speak a word to the engineers, merely leaning against the wall with her arms crossed and occasionally heaving a sigh.

When March arrived, Lev, Mikhail, and Roza focused on the upcoming launch. Their centrifuge training—which they’d once done in their tracksuits—was now done in space suits, and the engineers subjected them to the maximum expected load.

They also took meals in their space suits. Moving and eating weren’t particularly easy, but Lev found food a touch more delicious when he imagined eating as he gazed out upon the endless stars and planet Earth. The flavor of

the food hadn't actually changed, of course, so Mikhail and Roza still struggled with the taste.

The three cosmonauts also began training in a replica of the rocket cabin. Lev's heart raced just from sitting inside it.

"This is what we'll ride into space," he whispered.

Something stirred deep in his heart as he scanned the cabin gauges, knowing that Irina had ridden in this cabin too. When he closed his eyes, it was like he could see stardust. In order to focus, he kept his enthusiasm in check.

Meanwhile, the supervising engineer ran the three cosmonauts through what they'd do during the flight and how to operate the radio. They also had to train their bodies to respond to potential accidents like air leaks.

All the rocket's operations were automated, just as they had been for Irina, but the cosmonauts were taught to operate the rocket in the rare case that the automated systems failed. However, the password to switch to manual controls was kept secret even from the cosmonauts. Lt. Gen. Viktor informed them that, in the case of an emergency, they'd receive the password via radio transmission.

Mikhail protested the decision. Even secrecy had its limits. "If we lose radio contact, the password will be completely out of reach."

Lt. Gen. Viktor shook his head. "The engineering department made the decision. In the case of a cosmonaut's mental state deteriorating, they cannot be allowed access to the password. Irina Luminesk was not given the password either."

"Understood..." Mikhail let out a short, incredulous sigh, but he did not press the issue further.

The training felt endless, and it made the air itself heavy. Roza came out of the noise bath and sat with her hands on her forehead as if carrying the weight of her headache. She was deeply exhausted; her lips were dry, and her skin and hair had lost their usual luster. Worried, Lev brought her a cup of water.

"It's rough in there. Here, have a drink," he said.

However, Roza only shoved it away in frustration. The cup fell from Lev's hand

and spilled on the floor. “Oh...”

Roza glared at him, silent. Her eyes were alight with the flickering fire of rivalry.

March 9. Progress continued on the development side. A test launch to simulate the first official launch took place at the Albinar Cosmodrome. Using data gathered from the Nosferatu Project, Mehta 3KA made a successful lap around Earth and returned with a dog and mannequin on board.

Korovin raised a fist into the air and loudly proclaimed, “One more success, and we move on to the real thing!”

Gergiev had also received reports of the success. At a meeting regarding regional farming, after referring to the cultivation of undeveloped land, he made a powerful statement.

“In the very near future, we will turn our development toward space!”

The Union’s many animal launches left its detractors calling it “The Union Space Zoo,” but the most recent test launch heralded an end to that nickname.

By mid-March, the breath of Moroz faded from northern regions of the Union. Even in LAIKA44, the scent of daphnes drifted like the coming of spring, and the ice covering the trees began to thaw. The seasons were changing.

Despite the recent successes, Lev and the other cosmonauts continued their strict training regimen. Even Lev, who kept positive throughout the exercises, was growing exhausted, and he’d lost any desire to go out on his days off. The ban on alcohol kept him away from the jazz bar. His body and mind were reaching their limits. All that kept his spirits up were his dreams of space and the promise he’d made to Irina.

However, the training didn’t get any easier as the launch neared. Instead, it seemed to become even more strenuous. The cosmonauts moved on to parachute descent training, wearing their space suits to simulate the difficult conditions they’d experience upon their return.

After boarding the training plane, Lev, Mikhail, and Roza were taken to an altitude of seven thousand meters. They looked out at the sun setting over the swamplands. The fierce winds of a spring storm blew around them. Conditions were far from optimal.

The descent order was predetermined: Mikhail, Roza, and then Lev. Their space suits were heavy, a far cry from the flight jackets they were all used to during jumps like this. Lev was confident in the air, but he was still unsure he could land in the target zone, given the weather.

Mikhail took exit posture at the launch doors. "I'll see you in the target zone," he said. "Three, two, one, zero!"

Without a hint of reservation, he dropped. Roza was next. There was something unsteady about the way she held herself. Her cheeks were drawn and pale. She'd looked utterly fatigued for some time, but today was particularly bad.

Lev knew she would ignore his worries, as she always did, but he tapped her shoulder regardless. "Maybe you should take a rest today?"

"Don't be an idiot," Roza replied. She glared at Lev with bloodshot eyes, but her voice lacked conviction. "Three, two, one, zero."

She threw herself into the evening sky.

"I hope she'll be okay..."

Lev knew that a small mistake could lead to serious injury, and he wondered if Roza would be all right. He had a bad feeling about her jump.

"This is not the time to worry about someone else..." he muttered.

There wasn't a chance to think about it any further. Cold winds slapped at Lev's face from the launch doors, bringing him back to his own jump. He left a little time between Roza's jump and his own, then leaped into the sky. The cold winds seemed to cut at him.

After some time in freefall, he looked down to see Roza's parachute open. "Thank goodness..."

Assuming that Roza was okay, Lev focused on his own descent, opening his parachute and navigating toward the target zone.

“Hm?”

Lev watched as the strong winds took hold of Roza’s parachute. He expected her to quickly right her course, but instead, she let the winds direct her and drifted farther and farther from the target zone.

“What the...?”

At first, he thought he might have gotten the target zone wrong, but Mikhail was gliding over to the very place Lev knew it to be. Perhaps something had happened to Roza, but Lev couldn’t tell for sure—not from this far up, with her parachute blocking his view. With each thought in his mind, Roza drifted farther. At this rate, there was no telling where she would end up. It wasn’t even clear that she’d land safely.

“Damn it,” Lev said, giving up on the target zone and heading off in pursuit of Roza.

It wasn’t easy to tail her through the sky, especially in fierce gusts of wind and while wearing an unwieldy space suit. But as they neared the ground below, Lev managed to get about level with the young woman.

“Hey! Roza!” he shouted into the wind.

Roza’s head moved slightly at the sound of his voice, but she did not reply. He could tell she was having trouble controlling her parachute. If he got too close, their parachutes would tangle, but he couldn’t gain control of hers from a distance.

The two were about a thousand meters from the ground. Lev looked down at the earth. They were passing over the Bolik River, which weaved throughout the swamplands. It was full of countless chunks of ice. If Roza landed in the midst of water that cold, it could spell her death.

Lev prayed she could at least get herself clear of the river, but her parachute seemed drawn toward it. He decided he could no longer simply sit back and watch. His only chance was to force them into a crash landing away from the river. The key was making sure they were at a height where their parachutes

could tangle without causing injuries too extensive. If everything went well, their sturdy space suits and tough helmets would protect them.

He looked for a location that would soften the landing and spotted a section of small trees and shrubbery. If they were lucky, landing there would only result in a few cuts, bumps, and bruises. The river rushed beneath them.

“No turning back now...”

Lev gathered his wits one last time, then pulled his parachute cords and headed straight for Roza. Their parachutes collided. Fear rushed through Lev’s stomach; Roza’s pale face looked up at him for help.

“Ah... Aaahh...”

“Close your helmet visor!” Lev shouted. “Get ready for a five-point landing!”

Lev closed his visor, grabbed Roza’s parachute cords, and pulled her to the riverside. Her parachute tilted and spun as they hurtled toward the ground, with Lev doing everything he could to reduce their speed. Their parachutes entwined and filled with air, slowing the two cosmonauts down enough to lessen the impact.

“Gaaaah!”

Huge shocks ran through their bodies as they hit the trees and shrubs that Lev had aimed for. As they neared the ground, he and Roza tumbled into five-point landings. For an instant, his vision went black.

“Ow... Augh...”

After making sure he could move his arms and legs, Lev let out a deep breath. He picked himself up and headed straight for Roza.

“Roza!” He knelt by her side. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I...I’m fine...”

Roza cautiously sat up, cradling her body as if folding in on herself. Her eyes glistened as teardrops formed at the ends of her eyelashes, and she began to tremble. Then she let out a light, hitching sob.

Never before had Lev seen her look so afraid.

Some time after their landing, Lev and Roza were picked up by a helicopter and subjected to Lt. Gen. Viktor's angry shouts.

"Fools! Trying to get yourselves killed!"

Lev's actions *had* been dangerously rash, and he could do nothing but accept whatever rage Lt. Gen. Viktor had in store for him.

The man slapped Lev's shoulder hard enough to hurt him before saying something completely unexpected. "You did good, Lev... It was a brave thing you did, risking your life to help a teammate. Worthy of a medal!"

"Th-thank you, sir!"

Lt. Gen. Viktor went on to boast of a rescue mission he'd been part of during the Great War. He put a hand to the scar on his forehead. "That's where I got this." Lev nodded along with his story.

Roza, wrapped in a blanket, stared silently at her feet.

After thorough exams at the medical diagnostics center, Lev and Roza were given some compresses and told that they'd heal in about three days. Although the bruising wouldn't impede the cosmonauts' regular training, the medical staff diagnosed Roza specifically with severe fatigue and ordered her to rest while they healed.

The two of them left the medical center together and headed for the dormitories. They walked down birch-lined streets illuminated by lamplight.

Roza was in low spirits, but Lev tried to look on the bright side. "Guess we're lucky we avoided any serious damage."

Roza's reply was awkward and sheepish. "Why would you do something so reckless and dangerous just to save me?"

"Why...? Isn't it obvious? I saw my teammate about to die right in front of me. I didn't have time to think. I just acted."

"Teammate, huh?" Roza muttered to herself before looking back at Lev. "Remember what I said to you? 'A honey tongue, a heart of gall'?"

“I do.”

“For you, I’ll make a revision. A tongue *and* a heart of honey. Some jam and sugar wouldn’t be misplaced either.”

“Sounds like a recipe for severe heartburn.” Lev clutched his throat and poked his tongue out.

“It doesn’t make sense to treat you like an enemy or a rival.” Roza let a wry grin rise to her face. She stopped by the side of the road, reached out, and caressed a daphne. “Do you remember this time last year, when we came here to LAIKA44? The daphnes were in bloom.”

“Er, no, I don’t...”

Lev didn’t even know what the flowers were called, let alone when they bloomed. He wasn’t interested in flowers, which was why he didn’t even know what Irina meant when she’d told him the stars were like chervils. He’d needed to visit the library later to look “chervils” up. Only then did he realize they were little star-shaped flowers.

Roza giggled. “One year ago, I remember hoping that by the time these bloomed again, we’d be going to space.”

She might have been the only candidate seeing her hopes and dreams overlap with the flowers around her. Lev had trained with her for a whole year, yet this was the first time he felt that he was getting to understand who she was as a young woman, not just a candidate. They walked along the path, avoiding the puddles of melting snow, and soon passed the soda water vending machine.

“You mind if I stop for a cup?” Lev asked. All the shouting from the parachute incident had left his throat dry.

As Lev dug for his wallet, Roza put a coin in the machine from beside him.

“Hm? Oh, you’re having one too?”

“It’s my treat,” Roza said quietly.

“Huh?!” Lev gawked at her, dumbfounded.

“A token of gratitude until I find a better way to thank you...”

“Don’t worry about it. This is fine,” Lev told her, pressing the button on the machine.

“Wait. Are you saying my life is only worth a cup of soda water?” She pursed her lips, nonplussed.

Lev grinned. “Well, it’s at *least* worth a round of zhizni.”

“A life for a...life,” she muttered, thinking about the meaning of the word.

“You got it.” Lev gave Roza a thumbs-up, and she chuckled.

“How do your jokes keep getting worse?” Roza bought a soda water for herself and sat on the nearby bench with a sigh. “I’m so tired...”

She glanced at Lev as if ordering him to sit, so he did, making sure to leave a little space between them. Roza didn’t say anything right away, choosing instead just to hold the cup in her hands. They listened to the low rumble of the vending machine and the fizzing of the soda water inside the cups.

“I’m...I’m going to drop out,” she said suddenly.

Lev looked at her, shocked. The cup in her hands trembled ever so slightly.

“If you hadn’t saved me, I might have died. My body wouldn’t listen to me. I really thought it was all over...”

Lowering her gloomy gaze, Roza drank from her cup. She heaved another sigh, and when she next spoke, it was with some relief.

“Ever since I made it to the last selection stage, I’ve pushed myself too hard. As a woman, I knew that if I wanted to be the first cosmonaut, I had to be better than you and Mikhail combined. Though I have a feeling the top brass always intended for a woman to be second.”

That was a prevailing line of thought, but Lev didn’t agree. “If you ask me, gender doesn’t matter when it comes to space.”

Roza waved him off. “Forget about it. I just don’t want to admit the truth.”

“Hm?”

“I hate to admit it, but physically, mentally...I’m not strong enough. I hated having a rival like you worry about me. After the noise bath, when I slapped

that cup away... Well, I'm sorry."

Lev thought back to her hateful glare.

Roza rolled up her sleeve and showed Lev her right arm. "It doesn't matter how much I train; I can't build any more muscle than what I've got," she said, studying the veins visible through her pale skin. Her arm was about half the width of Lev's. "I just don't want to put it all down to gender differences."

She unrolled her sleeve and stared at the sky.

"When I first entered the air force, people looked down on me for being female. But I got so good as a pilot that I wouldn't lose to anyone. Those men could belittle me all they wanted, but when we took to the skies in mock battles, I took their tails and rained hell on their wings. I took their pride and self-esteem, and I tore it into shreds. They started calling me the White Rose of Sangrad because it kept happening, but I'm not beautiful like a rose."

Roza flicked her silver white hair neatly behind her and went on.

"My hard work earned me the spot of ace when I was in the air force. But during cosmonaut training? I hit my limits. I kept thinking of being left behind. I couldn't sleep... I felt like I was going crazy..."

Lev could only listen and nod patiently, waiting for her to continue.

"That Nosferatu—I know she went through some awful stuff, but even so, she flew. She made it to space, and she wrote flight logs she could be proud of... It's truly commendable."

Roza absolutely detested Irina, but she acknowledged what the vampire girl had to overcome to reach space. It made Lev happy, as if she were praising *him*.

"She really did give it everything," he said, "and now it's my job to catch up."

Roza's gaze flicked to him, suspicious. "Is that why you didn't come with us to the parade? Were you meeting with the vampire?"

Lev couldn't hide how flustered the question made him.

She stared at him in astonishment. "Unbelievable... I guess for a guy like you, when it comes to space, gender differences *and* differences in species don't matter. Am I right?"

“W-well...I mean, the day she flew, the whole blockhouse exploded in cheers. Seriously.” Lev tried to shift Roza’s focus away from himself with his answer, then gulped down more soda water.

In a hushed voice, Roza added, “I do hope she isn’t disposed of, you know.”

“Yeah... But I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“Oh?”

Lev couldn’t tell Roza about the design bureau, since it was confidential. “I just...don’t think it’s in the cards,” he said instead.

Still, something about the future Irina had shared with him didn’t sit right. Irina and Lev were both bad liars; they were alike in that way.

Lev took another sip of his soda water, and its bitter taste spread through his mouth.

April 4. Time rolled on with no word regarding the launch, and everyone began to doubt what they’d been told about a spring launch date. Then a communiqué arrived from the central committee, addressed to Lt. Gen. Viktor.

The manned spaceflight will take place between the dates of April 10 and April 20.

That meant the launch could happen as soon as a week from now. It was very sudden, and LAIKA44 practically erupted at the news. However, the official cosmonaut had yet to be decided. Normally, a choice like this would be made with enough time for adequate preparation, but the Union could hardly be considered “normal.”

In the conference room of the Training Center, Lev and the members of the Mehta Shest stood facing Lt. Gen. Viktor.

Lt. Gen. Viktor’s brow furrowed as he spoke. “The flight is automated, meaning that the pilot need only sit in the cabin, for the most part. So, it is possible that pilot selection may happen as late as directly before launch.”

Although that was true, Lev didn’t think it particularly wise. Mikhail’s slight grimace proved he felt the same way.

Lt. Gen. Viktor's talks usually ended once his report was over, but perhaps some kindness had bloomed in the man during the year he'd watched over this team. He looked at them somewhat apologetically and went on.

"I'm sorry, but my opinion on the matter of cosmonaut selection is only considered a reference. They'll make the final decision at a committee meeting in Albinar, and the exact date is still unconfirmed."

"Understood..." All Lev could do was go along with it. Still, knowing the launch was imminent frayed his nerves.

"We'll leave LAIKA44 at 1700 hours. Make sure you're all ready," Lt. Gen. Viktor told them. Then he clapped and cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. "And...one more thing. Mikhail, Lev, a special order came from the committee."

"A request?" Lev asked timidly.

"After this briefing concludes, you two will record your prelaunch comments and have your photos taken inside the cabin. They are for the official record. You will use the mock cabin, but this won't be practice. Consider it the real thing."

A fake record for the official record. It was the very height of sectionalism and adherence to secrecy. The cosmodrome's hangars were top-secret facilities, and the military wouldn't permit outside photographers to enter, no matter how established they were. Still, the government needed comments and photos to mark the occasion, so staged pictures were better than none. The citizens wouldn't know the difference. It was a practical, if irrational, approach.

More noticeably, however, Roza was not included. She had already bowed out. No one would have blamed her if she looked dejected, but she stood straight at attention with her eyes on Lt. Gen. Viktor.

"Thank you for allowing me to remain part of the team, even after causing such an incident."

Lt. Gen. Viktor let a smile creep onto his face. "Your thanks is unnecessary. Continue your training, and do not slack off. There is still a chance that the two potential cosmonauts could get injured or sick."

“Understood!”

Roza’s energetic reply rang through the room. Now that she’d recovered, her usual vigor had returned. She looked every bit the vivacious rose of her namesake.



Lev and Mikhail dressed in their full space suits for the photos in front of the mock cabin. At the photographer's request, they also posed as if they were just about to head into space. Mikhail was a natural, and could smile for the camera easily, but Lev found getting into character a little more difficult. It took a few photos for him to get going.

After the photographs were taken, both cosmonauts recorded official prelaunch comments, imagining what they would say to the world in the minutes before launch.

Mikhail went first. "Beloved comrades, people of the world. I will soon board this ship on humanity's first-ever voyage into space. Is there any dream grander than this? I will never forget the honor of making this journey for the human race."

He spoke calmly and with poise, delivering a perfect speech as if he practiced it daily. The engineers who had been brought to act as a crowd applauded. Then it was Lev's turn. He imagined the launch, and the feelings that welled within him became his words.

"My beloved friends! People of the world! In just a few moments, this ship will launch, laden with our dreams. Uh... As this incredible moment approaches, I'm wondering what to say to you all... But I hope we can share in the joy of this achievement!"

Lev's words were rushed, but his feelings were clear. The attending crowd applauded and cheered even more than before. Unlike Mikhail's confident, self-important words, Lev's speech won the crowd's support because he'd expressed that his dream was *everyone's* dream.

Relieved that the recording was finally over, Lev walked toward Mikhail with his usual warm smile.

"Giving comments like that really makes it feel real, huh? Not long now," he said.

Mikhail displayed none of Lev's excitement or nervousness. "Don't you think your comments lacked gravity?"

"Oh? You think so?"

“They hardly carried the weight of a historical spaceflight.”

“I didn’t think too hard about them. I just said what I felt, that’s all.”

“Hmph. I guess we’ll find out which speech was more suitable soon enough.”

Judging by Mikhail’s tone, he believed *his* was. Lev had a feeling that the final cosmonaut selection would come down to who the committee felt matched their desired image, but Lev couldn’t bring himself to bend to the will of politicians.

At 1700 hours, the fiery light of the evening sun shone on LAIKA44’s steel gates. Lev and the other members of the Mechta Shest got on the bus. The Training Center engineers, technicians, and remaining cosmonaut candidates saw them off.

“Good luck!”

“Come back safe, okay?”

The candidates’ voices expressed all sorts of emotions, as if they were seeing friends off to battle. Their words carried encouragement and jealousy, worry and uncertainty.

“We’ll see you when we come back,” Lev called.

Carrying the dream they all shared on his shoulders, he left the closed city in which he’d spent the last year. Rather than driving directly to the Albinar Cosmodrome, the bus first stopped by Sangrad’s Grand City Square for the passengers to pay their respects at the mausoleum for the Union’s founder.

On their way, big news broke, courtesy of an article in *Arnack News*, one of the United Kingdom’s newspapers.

“THE ZIRNITRA UNION LAUNCHES TOP-SECRET HUMAN SATELLITE INTO SPACE!”

The article’s contents read, “*The launch took place on February 4. The astronaut’s name is Captain Vladimir Susnin.*”

It was entirely fake. A Venus probe had been launched on the date in question, and it appeared the article had come out after the Union attempted to cover up its failure. Venus Probe #1 had not headed for Venus—instead, it

had done a lap around Earth, making the endeavor a huge flop.

The government censored that as always, but the probe still lurked in Earth's orbit, and blowing it up was impossible. Thus, the Union's government publicly declared it a successful orbiting test satellite. Consequently, the United Kingdom grew suspicious as to what the test satellite was. This series of events eventually led to the false report in *Arnack News*.

"Captain Susnin crash-landed and was rushed to the hospital. His current status is unknown. The Zirnitra Union's government, unable to publicize the incident, continues to hide it."

Arnack News was a third-rate paper that often reported misinformation, but its claim that the news came directly from a special operative in Sangrad caused quite a stir. Other newspapers reported the news without confirming its validity, which lent the rumor an air of truth, and it spread throughout the world. Even the Union was buzzing about it now.

It was true that Susnin did exist *and* he was currently in the hospital. The Union simply left things as they were, publicly denouncing the article and stating, "This is misinformation! Susnin is indeed in the hospital, but the man was in a car accident!"

The Delivery Crew had been dispatched to investigate the newspaper's alleged "special operative."

While the top levels of government put out this fire, Lev, the cosmonauts, and the citizens of the nation looked on with wry smiles. To them, *Arnack News* spreading misinformation and the government hiding the truth were like peas in a pod. Very few citizens believed any articles in *The Istina*—the national paper with a name meaning "*The Truth*"—to the point that many people called it "*The Lozh*," meaning "*The Lie*."

Regardless, the misinformation spread, and the government was scrambling so quickly to address it that the whole world now had its eyes on the space race. The bus carrying the Mehta Shest drove to Sangrad under the cover of darkness. Soon they would be wrapped in similar levels of attention.

While the others slept, Lev looked out the window at the stars and thought of Irina. If news of her test launch had somehow leaked, instead of Susnin, what

measures would the government have taken? Would they have acknowledged the launch? Would they have claimed misinformation? Or...

Lev dozed off, his questions floating unanswered.

Spring had truly sprung in Sangrad. There were fewer days below freezing, and any snow remaining in the shadows gradually melted. Those visiting the Neglin shed their thick coats, and a jazz band played in the historic city square. People even lined up at a nearby ice cream stand.

After paying their respects at the mausoleum, Lev and Mikhail left the rest of the group to spend some time around the city square with an official photographer and his 8mm camera. That was part of some special orders the committee had given them.

The government needed to keep the closed city of LAIKA44 hidden from the public, so they wanted photos taken showing that the cosmonauts had lived in Sangrad all this time. Lev felt awkward about participating in such a lie, but all the same, he walked along to their specified shoot locations.

When they arrived at a statue of a mounted soldier at the edge of the square, they found a tall woman waiting for them, licking an ice cream. She wore a polka-dot dress with an orange jacket. The woman was a portrait of the city's refined style, and she gave a friendly wave when she saw them.

"Nice to meet you. I am Lyudmila Kharlova. I'm First Secretary Gergiev's press secretary."

"Huh?"

Even the photographer was shocked by the sudden appearance of someone so powerful, but her ID confirmed Lyudmila was who she claimed to be. Lev remembered seeing her in a photo, standing by Gergiev's side. But why was she here? Considering that Lt. Gen. Viktor had told them the cosmonaut would be chosen soon, she was probably here on Gergiev's behalf to scope them out.

However...

"The cosmonaut has been decided," Lyudmila said in a tone that felt entirely

too casual. “That’s what I came to tell you both.”

“They’ve...made their choice?” Mikhail sputtered.

Lyudmila giggled at his confusion, then took an envelope from her jacket and opened it. “The pilot will be...Captain Vladimir Susnin.”

“What?!”

Wasn’t that misinformation? Lev stared at the name on the document, but it didn’t change. *Susnin*. Mikhail froze with shock.

Lyudmila waved the paper in front of them. “Oh, you thought it was a lie? The car accident was, as was the reported launch in February. Susnin trained in another closed city, not LAIKA44. You two are now officially Cosmonaut #2 and Cosmonaut #3.”

Church bells rang out as it hit five o’clock, and Lev’s brain seemed to ring with them. His vision blurred, and he couldn’t think straight.

Lyudmila burst into laughter. “I’m joking, I’m joking. I can’t believe you two fell for that!”

Lev and Mikhail were still stunned.

Lyudmila scrunched the letter and envelope into a ball and passed it to the photographer. “Throw that away for me, please.”

Meanwhile, Lev struggled to get his voice to work. “I, uh...”

Lyudmila put her ice cream near his lips. “Surely you know the saying ‘To fool your enemies, start with your friends’?”

Was it possible that the Union deliberately let the misinformation about Susnin slip to hide the upcoming manned launch? Lev had his suspicions.

“Well, let’s get this photo shoot started. Oops! My ice cream is melting.”

Lyudmila lapped at her ice cream again, making it look very tasty. She seemed free-spirited and easygoing, but there was also something unknowable about her. Lev felt the darkness of the Union in her, and it sent a brisk bolt of terror through him.

Only one cosmonaut would go public after the success of the manned launch, so Lev and Mikhail were not photographed together. They talked with a florist, ate ice cream, and stared up at the beautiful facade of the church. There were countless citizens around them, but nothing they did drew any attention, since they were still little more than unknown air force privates.

Lyudmila stood by the photographer, eating a second ice cream and throwing out the odd comment like “Why so glum?” and “Can you make eating that look a little more enjoyable, please?” Apparently, she was having a good time. She seemed more like a director than someone with a hand in the cosmonaut selection.

The four of them circled the square and arrived in front of the mausoleum. Mikhail took a copper coin from his wallet, closed his eyes in prayer, and threw it skyward.

The coin landed at Lev’s feet. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“This is where all the paths to the Union’s future began,” Mikhail replied, pointing at the ground. “It’s only natural that we pass through here on the way to space. I’m just paying the fare.”

The coin he’d thrown was from 1936—the year he was born.

Lyudmila stared at him. “You wear that cool, collected mask all the time, but you’ve got a cute side too, huh?”

Mikhail turned away, his face flushing red in a rare show of embarrassment.

“Well, I guess I should pay the fare too,” said Lev, deciding to copy Mikhail with a copper coin of his own. He didn’t have one from 1939, though; the coin in his wallet was from 1943.

Lev’s shoulders drooped with disappointment, but then he realized that was Irina’s birth year. She’d told him she was seventeen. In that case, he’d pray for her. He’d pray that a rocket carrying her dreams would fly to the moon.

“Hup!” Lev grunted, throwing the coin with all he had...and losing track of where it landed. “Huh? Where’d it go?”

“Oh dear.” Lyudmila chuckled. “Let’s hope that’s not a portent for a potential

cabin landing...”

As they walked around the square taking photos, a white building—the Military Institute of Medical Science—peeked through gaps between the other structures. Irina was in there now. Lev looked at the hospital and pictured her. He worried about her examinations, and he hoped the institute’s employees were treating her as well as other test animals that survived. They had all been treated as “things” before their launches, but were loved upon their return and given the royal treatment in place of medals.

Given the way the Delivery Crew saw Irina, however, there was every chance she was being treated as a “cursed species,” chained up and—

“Not feeling well, Lev?” Lyudmila ran the stick from her ice cream along his neck.

He jumped in fright. “Eep!”

“You need the hospital?” Her tone was soft, but her deep green eyes were sharp. They were not the eyes of the woman who’d watched them and laughed, but of a political leader.

“No... I’m fine, thank you.”

“Good to hear.”

Lyudmila lifted the stick from his neck, and Lev found himself suddenly able to move again. Lyudmila’s eyes narrowed, and she held her ice cream stick like a conductor’s baton, drawing a circle around the whole city square.

“If the manned flight is a success, they’re planning to hold the nation’s largest victory celebration ever. They’ll have it right here. The square will be filled with two hundred thousand people. A vast sea of people, people, so many people. Four hundred thousand eyes, all locked on the nation’s hero, standing right there...”

Lyudmila’s stick pointed at the mausoleum’s speaking platform. Just imagining all those people made Lev break out in a light sweat.

Lyudmila’s enraptured expression turned suddenly serious, and she faced Mikhail and Lev. “Well, it’s about time I left. Before I go, may I ask you

something?”

“Yes,” Mikhail and Lev replied in tandem.

Lyudmila smiled. “What sort of person do you see as history’s first cosmonaut?”

It seemed this was why she’d come. Lev searched his mind for an answer, but Lyudmila pointed at Mikhail first.

“A person worthy of being called a hero,” Mikhail said confidently.

“That’s one correct answer. And you, Lev?”

Lev grinned a bit sheepishly. “I wish I could say I should be, but...I don’t know.”

At that, Lyudmila laughed. “Honest, aren’t you?”

“I *do* know something a cosmonaut can’t be without,” Lev added, placing a fist on his chest as an image of Irina floated into his mind. “Even at the risk of their own life, they have to desire it; they have to want to fly into space.”

“Another correct answer. But as for what I want in a cosmonaut...” The smile disappeared from Lyudmila’s face. “It’s a revolutionary to lead us into the new world.”

Mikhail and Lev were unsure how to respond.

Lyudmila cocked her head with a wink. “Just kidding. I’ll see one of you again when the position is decided. Until then, enjoy your trip!”

She waved and left, looking every bit a little devil playing with people like chess pieces. Lev, Mikhail, and the photographer glanced at one another, feeling lost.

Mikhail raised both his hands in mock surrender. “I guess we should expect nothing less from the right hand of the Supreme Leader. For all we know, none of what she said was true.”

“Yeah...”

Lev felt like Lyudmila didn’t have a tongue of honey—she had a tongue of space food, so horrible you couldn’t even tell what the ingredients were.

After the photo shoot finished, the departure time for the bus to Albinar drew near. Lev and the others hurried to the bus stop. As they crossed the square and national heritage park, Lev's ears perked up at the tune the jazz band inside the park was playing. It was a familiar melody.

“‘My Beloved’...?”

Back when Lev and Irina were still getting acquainted, he'd taken her to a jazz bar. She fell for the song the moment she heard it, and she'd even found a way to put it in a message from space. The song was laden with memories for the two of them.

Irina had claimed she didn't know what the song was about, being from a different country, but Lev wondered if she actually did. It was a song that said, “Whatever the language, I want to tell you that you're dear to me.”

Scarlet Eyes

• очи алый •

IRINA AND ANYA were out on their daily walk. The season had changed, but they were still doing what they did every day. Irina felt she could walk their entire route with her eyes closed.

The Delivery Crew agent following them—a man with a potato-like face—let out a yawn. He was as tired of keeping watch as Irina was of her everyday routine.

At the very least, Anya always brought up something new to talk about to bring Irina a little levity. “All the spring vegetables are on the shelves at the department store. Even looking at them is exciting.”

“I don't mind it getting warmer, but I don't want it to be much hotter than this,” Irina grumbled.

She disliked heat, and Sangrad was significantly warmer than her hometown. Besides, she didn't enjoy having to dress like the humans around her.

“By the way, do you think spring has begun in LAIKA44 too?” she asked Anya.

“I think there’d still be some snow. That pine cone you threw at the lake to bring in the New Year might still be on the ice, Irinyan.”

During the New Year, Anya had wished for her and Irina to become better friends. Irina wanted to let the girl know that her wish had come true, but she was too embarrassed to say it. She lowered her gaze timidly, mustering up all her courage to voice her next words.

“You can call me by my real name, if you want.”

“What?! Really?!” Anya practically leaped into the air in surprise.

Irina was just as startled by her reaction. “Really... I mean, I just call you Anya, so you can...just call me...Irina, if you like.”

Anya thought for a moment, then clapped. “Okay! In that case...I’ll call you Rina!”

“Rina?”

“Because you looked so happy when little Snegurochka called you ‘Rina’ on New Year’s Eve.”

“Ugh... Well, okay...”

Irina was embarrassed to think that the delight she’d tried to hide didn’t escape Anya’s watchful eye. At the same time, having a nickname she liked made her feel suddenly that much closer to Anya. Of course, she couldn’t bring herself to speak a word of that.

“You don’t have to try so hard to appease me either,” Irina added.

Anya put a hand to her hair, feeling a little conflicted. “But I do it because I respect you, Rina.”

It tickled Irina to hear her new nickname so soon; however, she was also confused. “You respect me? But why?”

Anya brought her face closer to Irina’s and spoke in a low voice. “You’re a cosmonaut.”

Although she’d said the words easily, they warmed Irina’s heart. She wanted

to wrap Anya in a hug, but people were watching, so she simply responded with a long, thoughtful hum.

Irina wondered about the wish she'd made for Lev to become a cosmonaut. She didn't know how that was going—she hadn't been told anything about the manned flight, and Anya's sources seemed to have nothing for them either.

Just then, some passing voices caught Irina's attention.

"Did you hear the news? A military guy by the name of Susnin flew into space."

"Aw, c'mon. It's gotta be a lie, right?"

Someone flew into space?

Seeing Irina freeze in confusion, Anya tapped her shoulder. "It's not true."

"Oh...really?"

Anya pointed at the radio tower. "If there really had been a spaceflight, they'd have broadcast it all over the city."

Irina heaved a sigh of relief. Still, she wondered how much longer she would have to live like this. She was getting fed up with it all. No one was telling her anything about the manned flight, and her gut twisted with anxiety. Every day, she went through the same pointless tests, and she had almost no time to herself. Her bleak predicament left her wanting to break into a sprint and scream as loudly as she could.

She looked at the mausoleum at the end of the city square and the speaking platform at the top of it. For a moment, she imagined what would happen if she ran up there and shouted to the world, "I am history's first cosmonaut!" But she knew people would only think she was crazy. Then the Delivery Crew would grab her, and not one good thing would come of it.

"Hey, Rina. How about some ice cream?"

Whenever she noticed Irina feeling down, Anya bought her food to lift her spirits. They purchased ice creams and ate them as they walked around the heritage park, and music drifted on the wind to their ears.

"Hm?" Irina noticed a melody taking hold of her heart. "Isn't that 'My

Beloved’?”

Through the noisy crowd, she could make out a jazz number. An announcer on the radio in her hospital room had once explained the song’s message: “Whatever the language, I want to tell you that you’re dear to me.” Every time she heard the song, she remembered Lev and her heart grew heavy. She rushed to leave the park.

“Wait...”

At that moment, she saw a flash of a face she could never forget on the other side of the fence separating the park from the square.

“Lev?”

It couldn’t be him. He couldn’t be here. Yet there was Mikhail, standing by his side.

“Lev!”

The music drowned out Irina’s voice. She ran, ice cream still in hand, her body acting of its own accord. She didn’t even think about what to say.

Just as she reached the fence, a figure in black blocked her path. The big hands of the Delivery Crew agent wrapped around her, stopping her from going any farther.

“This behavior is not allowed.”

The cold, low voice was laced with danger, and Irina stood still. Her ice cream was smushed against the agent’s overcoat. He took it from her, dropped it on the ground, and crushed it under his boot. When Anya finally caught up to them, he shot her a glare.

“Keep a better eye on it,” he snarled.

Anya nodded, tears threatening to spill from her eyes. “I’m sorry...”

The final notes of “My Beloved” hung in the air as the jazz band finished, and the crowd broke into thunderous applause. Irina looked around for Lev, but he was nowhere to be found. She could still feel the strong grip of the Delivery Crew agent on her back and stomach, and the warmth she once felt from Lev’s soft embrace seemed to have vanished completely.

Interlude: интерлюдия

Black Dragon's Eyes

• очи цирнитра •

THE CITY OF SANGRAD was wrapped in pearly white mist, and the forest on its outskirts was wet from falling drizzle. A jet-black government vehicle drove to a public cemetery outside the city. In the car, behind panes of bulletproof glass, Lyudmila passed Gergiev documents regarding the two potential cosmonauts.

“Hm... This Mikhail Yashin is held in very high regard,” Gergiev said.

“He’s number one in every category. Calm and collected. Strong leadership qualities. He’s from a middle-class family, and he has that air about him. He won’t cause trouble or bring shame to the nation, no matter where he is sent. Here’s the recording of his official prelaunch comments.”

“I will soon board this ship on humanity’s first-ever voyage into space.”

Lyudmila then played a clip she’d secretly captured with a discreet recording device.

“A person worthy of being called a hero.”

Gergiev nodded with some interest. “He is confident.”

“Handsome too,” Lyudmila said, pointing to his photo with a smile.

“Looks are important.” Gergiev turned his eyes to Lev’s files. “And then we have young Lev Leps.”

“His performance is top-class. Strong sense of justice, very sociable. Born in a poor farming village. Impulsive and acts on his emotions, for better or worse. He was pivotal to the success of the Nosferatu Project. There is one incidence of violence on his record.”

"In just a few moments, this ship will launch, laden with our dreams."

"His dream is the dream of his people," muttered Gergiev.

In contrast to Mikhail's selfish comments, Lev's represented the world he lived in.

"Even at the risk of their own life, they have to desire it; they have to want to fly into space."

Gergiev clapped lightly. "He is passionate too."

"Compared to Mikhail, he lacks a certain style."

"And what did you think after meeting the two of them?"

Lyudmila lightly flicked the photograph of Lev. "Choosing this one may be something of a gamble."

"A gamble, you say?"

"I wonder whether he could play his role and be the hero..."

The rocket was automated, so its pilot only really needed a strong enough body to withstand the trip. Deciding on the cosmonaut thus came down to what would happen upon their return.

At that moment, the car came to a gentle stop at the graveyard. The bodyguard acting as driver began to leave the car with umbrella in hand, but Lyudmila stopped him.

"Stay here. I'll go with him."

Lyudmila motioned to her umbrella. She and Gergiev got out of the car, and he walked over to her, carrying his bouquet of carnations. The two then strode into the graveyard. They could hear woodpeckers pecking the great pines, and wild mice hid in the shadows of the gravestones around them. It was early morning, and the two were all alone.

"Like tears, this rain." Gergiev had once had a son in the air force. He had died in battle in 1943. "By the way...you said you wanted to speak alone. Perhaps you wanted to...invite me on a vacation?"

Lyudmila answered Gergiev's joke with a polite smile. "Well, even the Delivery

Crew wouldn't hide wiretaps on gravestones."

It was a fact that the Supreme Leader's rivals secretly recorded and taped many of his activities. On top of that, intelligence agents were sniffing around like dogs, having caught wind that a launch was imminent. It was hard to do much of anything, making the graveyard a place where Lyudmila could update Gergiev with some secrecy.

"It's about Irina Luminesk," she said. "When the launch date is confirmed, they will push for her disposal. You've seen that conflicts between the people of Arnack and the dhampir have increased. That's making the Delivery Crew anxious."

"Well, it's safe to say that if the world knew we'd made a young vampire into a test subject, the dhampir would turn their anger on us..."

Gergiev wiped drops of rain from his sleeve as Lyudmila showed him a photo of Irina.

"It seems a shame to kill someone so cute," she said. "We could make her a singer. Perhaps an actress? Even the United Kingdom have their dhampir stars, you know."

"Surely you're joking."

"Of course."

Gergiev crushed a rotten pine cone under his foot. "So, if she has no use outside being a test subject, our only option is execution?"

A bolt of lightning flashed ominously across the dark sky, and the rain came down harder. Dense drops ran from the umbrella onto the photograph of Irina.

Lyudmila sent Gergiev a knowing smile. "I didn't say she has no use. Death is a part of revolution, but as for this one..."

Thunder roared around them as Lyudmila went on.

Chapter 6:

History's First Cosmonaut

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

WILD TULIPS BLOOMED around the Albinar Cosmodrome, and the uniquely medicinal scent of wormwood drifted through the air. Patches of snow still dotted the land, but the scenery was a far cry from December, when Irina's rocket had launched.

It was April 9. Three days had passed since the Mehta Shest arrived. The central committee had decided that the launch would take place between April 10 and 20. Tomorrow was fast approaching, but they had yet to announce the chosen cosmonaut.

Lev and Mikhail lived and ate separately from their teammates, sharing a small cabin on the outskirts of the base. They had been ordered to do so as part of the training and selection process. Next to their cabin, a group of doctors observed them and monitored their sleep patterns through sensors in their bunks. The two were immediately examined at any hint of a change in their health; a bad prognosis would mean they'd be swapped out for one of the alternates.

On-site scientists told Lev and Mikhail that they were waiting for perfect launch weather, but it was unclear whether this was true or they were still struggling with repairs. The anticipation was awful, like a vise around Lev's heart, constricting it with fear he couldn't put into words.

Were they going to reschedule the launch? That thought had just taken root in Lev's mind when things suddenly started moving. Various politicians arrived at the base, including Korovin and the committee's top brass. People on the base began talking about them gathering at the terrace by the small river. Lev's heart thumped hard in his chest when he heard the news.

There was no doubt as to why everyone had gathered; they were deciding who would be the first cosmonaut, just as Lt. Gen. Viktor had said. The meeting was private, held over many hours and light meals. Lev and Mikhail were restless. After eating dinner, they remained on standby, wrestling with expectation and uncertainty. Lev couldn't stand the silence.

"It's taking forever..." he said.

Mikhail nodded wordlessly. Lev's throat felt dry from nerves, and he found himself drinking more water than he needed. Even Mikhail, usually a picture of calm, stood often to go look out the window, where he let out long sighs. The room echoed with the ticking of the clock. Cars passed outside, and the sound of metal hammering reached them from the distant factories.

Then there came a knock at the cabin door.

Lev and Mikhail were called to an austere conference room on the Albinar base. Standing before the ever-stern Lt. Gen. Viktor, the two were tense with anticipation.

"The launch date has been decided. It will be three days from now, on April 12 at 0900 hours."

As usual, Viktor did not mince words. He was all business. He looked at Lev and Mikhail in turn.

"The cosmonaut is..."

Mikhail held his breath. Lev swallowed hard and repeated his name in his head over and over, willing Viktor to speak it.

Lev Leps. My dream...

Lt. Gen Viktor's gaze settled on Lev. "Private Second Class Lev Leps. It's you."

Lev's heart thrummed. Surprise and joy electrified every cell in his body, and his voice came out with a quiver. "Sir! I will do my utmost to carry out my duties!"

He felt the weight of responsibility settle on his shoulders. It was different from the thrill he'd felt at making it into the top three.

Meanwhile, Mikhail stood stock-still, blinking in shock. Lt. Gen. Viktor gazed at him coldly. “Mikhail. You are Cosmonaut #2. In the event of an emergency, you will be selected to fly.”

Mikhail was still frozen, like ice. In a raspy voice, he asked, “Why...?”

Bam! Mikhail’s fist slammed the long desk of the conference room.

“Why? Nobody outclassed me! He couldn’t beat me, *and* he was demoted! Why Lev? Why was *he* chosen?!”

Mikhail’s face was red, his anger clear, but Lt. Gen. Viktor remained dispassionate.

“It was a unanimous decision. You will accept it.”

“But—”

“Our motherland’s rocket does not carry *your* dreams, but the dreams of all of us. Someone who can carry those dreams dutifully and bring smiles to the people who hold them—*that* is a hero. And the person most suitable for that is Lev Leps.” Lt. Gen. Viktor spoke calmly, pausing to add, “That is my view on the matter.”

Mikhail knew he could not overturn the decision, but he couldn’t accept it either. His body trembled with rage, and his hands balled into fists. Lt. Gen. Viktor walked in front of him and placed an encouraging hand on his shoulder.

“This launch is not the end,” he said. “Come summer, there will be a grueling twenty-four-hour flight. We will need you and your skills for that.”

“Understood...” Mikhail nodded, biting his lip.

Lt. Gen. Viktor let out a breath as though he had just let go of a heavy weight, then faced Lev and Mikhail once more, standing up straight.

“The cosmonaut selection will be announced officially tomorrow. In preparation for the launch, you will need to fill out some documentation. Namely...” He trailed off, hesitating. “Your wills.”

A chill ran down Lev’s spine, putting a stopper in his overflowing excitement. A safe return was not guaranteed. The rocket would fly at twenty-eight thousand kilometers an hour into unknown space, and there was too much they

did not know and could not predict. Though chances were low, it was conceivable that a tiny rock drifting through space could puncture the cabin and open a huge hole in it.

Once Lev and Mikhail returned to their cabin, they began writing their wills as Viktor ordered. In the event of a successful flight, the documents would be burned immediately. Government officials wouldn't want people knowing that they'd sent cosmonauts into space in machinery so dangerous that a will was their ticket to board it.

Mikhail wrote in silence, his face devoid of expression. He put an invisible wall between himself and Lev, refusing to make eye contact.

Lev wanted to tell his family he'd been chosen, but he wasn't allowed. Since leaving them at the end of last year, he'd only informed them that he would be away for work and couldn't return. He hadn't contacted them since. Naturally, he wasn't permitted to tell Irina the news either. He knew he could visit his parents upon his return, but he worried about whether he'd ever see Irina again.

Korovin was on his way to the cosmodrome, and a meeting was planned for tomorrow to discuss the flight. Lev grappled with whether to ask him directly about Irina's move to the design bureau. In the end, however, he decided it was best not to. He'd been warned once before, when he was promoted back to candidate; he'd questioned Irina's future too persistently, and Korovin called him out on it.

Now that Lev had been selected as cosmonaut, he didn't want to sully Korovin's image of him by asking anything unnecessary. Not to mention Irina had trusted him with confidential information; it might make things worse if Korovin knew she'd leaked it.

Lev made up his mind and went back to writing his will. He didn't know if the message would ever reach her, and he knew that even writing her name was out of the question, but he channeled his feelings through his pen.

"To my dearest friend, with whom I trained and looked up at the moon: you have my gratitude."

April 10. Preparations went full speed ahead for the rocket launch, and each day's work started before dawn. Less than fifty hours remained, and the base was a frenzied hub of activity. However, since the project was strictly confidential and unknown to the general public, nearby residents could be seen lazily fishing by the river.

The central committee held an official meeting about the launch in the cosmodrome's auditorium. Lev attended, already knowing what was going to happen. It was just an announcement for the nation's political leaders—a formality for the official record.

"We hereby appoint Private Second Class Lev Leps as cosmonaut," said the person in charge of the agenda.

Lev stood. "You have entrusted me with duties that will go down in history," he declared, "and I vow to complete them with pride and honor."

Applause echoed through the auditorium. The photographers in attendance had Lev, and only Lev, in their sights. While Roza and the other reserves clapped, Lev shot Mikhail an apologetic look.

After he finished with his official appointment, Lev felt eyes on him from a corner of the auditorium. He searched for the source and saw Lyudmila breaking into a grin. She gave him a casual wave, then left without asking permission from anyone around her, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Korovin called out to Lev and Mikhail as they left the committee meeting. It was finally time for their detailed briefing.

It had been four months since Lev last saw the man. Korovin had a face full of stubble, and he'd lost an unhealthy amount of weight. His exhaustion was clear at a glance; he must have worked through many sleepless days and nights. But his gaze was still alight with excitement and energy.

"My ziland! It has been so long! But let us save our celebrations until after your return!" He gripped Lev's hand in a strong handshake, his hands blackened

and dirty with oil.

“Chief!” Lev greeted him.

Korovin then turned to the dispirited Mikhail. “Mikhail, you too must make sure to be well prepared,” he said kindly.

“Yes, sir...”

Mikhail spoke no more than necessary and in a purely businesslike manner. Lev knew how hard this must be for him, but Mikhail was so down that he was difficult to approach.

They went to a meeting room, where Lev and Mikhail took their seats. Korovin remained standing, and an apologetic look spread across his face as he began.

“The wills we had you write were essential, but...I have one more request. We did not have time to make the retrorockets functional for landing. This means that, as Comrade Irina did, you will eject from the cabin and descend via parachute.”

Lev nodded. “I don’t see the problem.”

“That’s not the problem,” Korovin said, shaking his head. “For the official record, however, we need you to say that you made a safe landing inside the cabin.”

“But...why would we need to say that?”

Seeing the confusion on Lev’s face, Korovin placed a confidential document in front of him. It had been officially stamped by the committee. “Again, it’s for the official record.”

The reason for the lie was that the nation was applying for a flight altitude world record through the International Aviation Association. As a rule, a flight was considered a failure if there was an ejection at the point of return. Parachute landings were not permitted; that rule held no matter how high the flight was.

Korovin gave Lev a deep, remorseful bow. “I’m so sorry, Lev. The will, and now this... I don’t like any of it. I know it’s not much of an excuse, but we’ll lose

our development budget if we don't obey. The budget makers are already of the opinion that we don't *need* manned spaceflights. They think unmanned probes could gather the data we require."

Lev felt Korovin's pain as if it were his own.

"I will do my duty," he said sympathetically. "There will be no problems."

It pained him, of course. The lie he told would echo into eternity, and the children of the future would believe it as truth. It was easy to brush it off by saying there was no other choice, but Lev had his doubts.

Korovin read Lev's feelings in his face. He clapped his hands together before changing the subject. "Let's talk about something more fun, shall we? Your call sign, for instance. We're frankly having some trouble with it. We just can't decide. It will be etched into human history, after all."

There were a few basic conditions for call signs. They had to be easy to understand, and they couldn't overlap with other radio terminology. Beyond that, anything was fine. Hearing Korovin talk about that subject brought a question to Lev's mind.

"Why was Irina's call sign Lycoris?" he asked. "Was it because of her eye color?" The lycoris was poisonous, which didn't give him a good impression.

"Her eyes are indeed red..." said Korovin, trailing off.

Lev pushed a little further. "But why the lycoris specifically? There are lots of red flowers. You could have chosen any one of them."

"Well..." Korovin scratched the back of his head, a little embarrassed. "The lycoris is said to symbolize the joy of reunion. It was a way of wishing her a safe return. I did not tell anyone but her that meaning, though it seemed to make her happy."

"Ah... I see..."

Lev had assumed the choice was simply made because of the color of her eyes, but his heart quivered at Korovin's devotion. He was not the only one who felt Irina was important. It relieved him to know that others cared for her too. Perhaps her talk of moving to the design bureau was really true after all.

“What? Is it so strange that I chose the name of a flower based on what it symbolizes?” asked Korovin.

“Yes,” Lev blurted before realizing how rude it sounded. “Oh, no. What I mean is, um...!”

He was fumbling, but Korovin seemed wholly unbothered. “Many scientists are romantics at heart. But as for your call sign, how about Cedar? It means ‘I live for you,’ or in your case, for our nation.”

Lev shook his head. He had his own idea. “Is there a flower that means something along the lines of praying for the safety of a person you’re apart from?”

“Hrm?”

“I want a call sign that reflects the feeling of praying for the nation’s people, and for those most important to you.”

Korovin hummed, then grinned as an answer struck him.

“Aster,” he said.

On the afternoon of April 11, launch preparations entered their final stages, and the rocket was placed on the launchpad. Like a grand silver tower, the huge rocket gleamed in the gentle light of the spring sun.

Nearby, Lev and Mikhail went through boarding procedures with Korovin. Lev had already seen a rocket at Irina’s launch, but knowing that *he* would ride it this time filled him with complete and utter awe. Mikhail was as dispassionate as usual, but he sighed less now.

Korovin looked even more haggard than the previous day, having been up since five in the morning to oversee transportation of the rocket and all its system checks. However, he did not stop to rest. He was far too busy gesturing this way and that as he gave orders.

“The flight plan remains the same as it was for Irina,” he told them. Upon his arrival in space, Lev would be in zero gravity for six minutes, do a lap around the planet, and then return.

Korovin went on to explain the reporting process from space. “Radio communications between the cosmonaut and the surface will not be broadcast live across the world. Once your arrival in space is confirmed, the national broadcast will make its first announcement, letting the world know that the launch was successful. Your own radio communications are scheduled to play the evening news.”

He warned Lev to say that he was in good health throughout his flight, even if he did not feel perfectly healthy. His instructions were to say nothing at all in the event that his condition took a turn for the worse.

Those instructions sparked a question in Lev’s mind. What announcement would be given if, after the first national broadcast, there was an accident and he couldn’t make it home? If that happened, was it possible they would use Mikhail as a standin? Lev didn’t want to believe it, but doubt pricked his heart.

As he debated whether to voice his concerns, he noticed that Korovin had broken into an unusual sweat. In the next instant, the man let out a pained groan and collapsed, clutching his chest.

“Chief?!”

Lev and Mikhail rushed to his side. Korovin’s face was white as a sheet, and his breathing was ragged. He looked on the verge of fainting.

“Ugh... My apologies. I wonder if you might...take me to my room for a moment.”

After returning to his room for medicine and half an hour of rest, Korovin waved Lev and Mikhail off as they sat by his bedside.

“Do not worry about me. You two are to continue your launch practice.”

As if to prove his health to them, Korovin casually lit a cigarette. Lev wanted to stay with him, but he still had a mountain of things to memorize and learn before launch.

“Please take it easy, Chief.”

Leaving Korovin in the doctors’ care, Lev returned to the launch site. Everybody was worried about the man’s condition.

Although Korovin didn't talk about himself at all, he *had* been put through enough punishment to kill a man after he was arrested on false charges and sent to the mines. He'd been beaten until his bones were broken, and malnutrition had made him horribly sick. Forced labor also took its toll on his heart. Even then, Korovin had held on to his dream of launching a rocket into space, and six years later, he'd returned.

After that, he'd made the United Kingdom tremble as a national secret—a scientific genius. He pushed ever forward to realize his dream, but his battered body never fully healed. The price he'd paid with his blood, sweat, and tears had bought this marvel right in front of them, mere moments before its launch—the rocket *Mechta*.

April 12. Launch day. It was 0530 hours, and the eastern sky began turning pale white.

A doctor gently shook Lev to rouse him from sleep. "Wake up."

"Mmn... Oh... Good morning."

Lev was relieved that they believed he'd been asleep. In reality, his head had been overstuffed with thoughts and feelings—about his will, Korovin, his family, and Irina. Try as he might, he hadn't slept a wink. The doctors had checked on him numerous times, but he feigned sleep all the while.

Despite the launch being right in front of him, Lev went through the same motions as usual. He did some light stretching and exercises, then had breakfast. He and Mikhail sat together at the same table, eating the same dishes: space food, soup, bread with jam, and coffee. Even now, Mikhail was distant.

When they'd returned to their cabin the previous evening, Lev had tried to strike up conversation.

"I hope the Chief recovers in time for launch," he'd said.

But Mikhail had only met him with a cold gaze in return. Lev desperately wanted them to be on good terms before the launch, but it seemed that speaking to Mikhail had the opposite effect.

As they prepared in complete silence, the woman tasked with looking after their cabin brought a bouquet of flowers as a parting gift.

“My son was a pilot,” she said. “He went missing in the war, but I’m sure he’s with God up there in space. Send him my love if you see him.”

Lev took the flowers and smiled. “Of course,” he said kindly. “What’s your son’s name?”

As Lev talked to the woman, he felt Mikhail’s eyes on him.

With their final health checks done, Lev and Mikhail went to their respective locker rooms to put on their space suits. On the front of the helmets were the letters of the UZSR. They’d taken what Lev did for Irina and made it part of the process.

Lev remembered that moment well. When he’d arrived on the scene, Irina had been surrounded by engineers trying to wrench her necklace from her hands. How lonely she must have felt, swarmed by those she couldn’t trust. But when Lev saw her in her space suit, he’d thought of her as a full-fledged cosmonaut. He wondered if he looked the same in his own suit. As much as he wanted to ask Irina, he couldn’t. She wasn’t here.

“Time to go! Everybody on the bus!” came Lt. Gen. Viktor’s voice.

There was no more time for Lev to linger on stray thoughts and memories, so he quickly jumped on the jam-packed bus headed for the launchpad. Mikhail boarded after him. Lt. Gen. Viktor, the medical officers, and other military staff were also onboard, and so were an official photographer and a newspaper reporter. When Irina headed for the launchpad, it had been a lonely, desolate ride. In comparison, Lev’s bus was wrapped in enthusiastic energy.

The bus rumbled along slowly toward the launchpad some three kilometers away. Lev looked out the window at the fiery glow of the sunrise, and the rocket standing silently in wait. He felt himself get more and more nervous. When people talked to him, he tried to reply with good-natured jokes. Mikhail sat in silence with his eyes closed.

Then Lev was hit by a sudden, strong urge to pee.

What do I do?!

There was no toilet at the launchpad. The VIPs in the bus were simply waiting. Launch wasn't for another two hours. Could he hold it in until he came back down to Earth?

A doctor noticed Lev's discomfort. "Something wrong?"

Lev made up his mind. He couldn't hold it anymore. "I'm so sorry...but...I need a little time!"

Fear rippled through the bus at Lev's tone.

"What is it?!"

"I've really, *really* got to go to the bathroom!"

The bus went eerily quiet, then erupted with laughter.

"Worry not, comrade!"

"Get off the bus and do your business around back! We will not have you dirty such a sacred space suit!"

Lev's face flared red with embarrassment, but the tension in the air seemed to dissipate entirely.

"We've got plenty of time until launch, so no need to rush!"

Lev dashed off the bus and looked around for cover, but there was nothing nearby. He circled to the back of the vehicle.

"Phew..."

As he was standing in place, finishing his business, Mikhail got off the bus and stood next to him.

"Oh, Mikhail, you heard the call of nature too?"

"Idiot. I went earlier."

Lev laughed. "That's so like you, always thinking ahead."

While Lev relieved himself, Mikhail put a hand on his shoulder and brought his head close. "Congratulations..."

"Huh?" Lev was so shocked, he almost stopped midstream.

“Someone who can carry the dreams of the people dutifully, and bring smiles to those who hold them as he carries out his tasks... That’s you.”

“Mikhail...?”

Lev finished and refitted his space suit. When he was done, Mikhail turned to him.

“If I were the chosen cosmonaut, and I told everyone I needed to go to the bathroom, they would’ve been bewildered...but then again, I’d never say that. I would have solely focused on playing the part of the perfect hero. But that hero doesn’t really exist.” Mikhail stared at the rocket towering in the distance. “I’ll be honest with you. Last night, when you were hoping that the Chief would recover in time for launch, I hoped you’d get sick. Until even just a few moments ago, I prayed they’d find something wrong with your suit. So I guess it’s only natural that I wasn’t selected.”

Mikhail chuckled and went on, holding back tears. “These last few days, with the two of us living together, I think I understand why you were chosen—both as the supervisor for the Nosferatu Project and the cosmonaut for this flight.”

Lev then admitted to Mikhail something he’d felt since he put on the space suit. “Thank you, Mikhail... But even now, I still don’t really understand. I don’t know what makes a good cosmonaut...or how I’m supposed to carry myself...”

Mikhail smiled. “Be yourself. Nobody knows how to be a cosmonaut yet. You’re the first.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right...”

Mikhail hugged Lev, their visors touching as if they were their cheeks. “You take my dream up there with you too, okay?”

Seeing Mikhail’s smile, Lev felt his heart grow lighter.



The morning sun gloriously lit up the bright blue sky, making the rocket shine. A gentle breeze drifted through the grass and trees. The scent of spring wrapped the launchpad, and the amount of people gathered put Irina's launch crowd to shame. Many had no idea the Nosferatu Project had even existed. The central committee, cosmodrome leadership, engineers and scientists, vice-director of the Delivery Crew, and cosmonaut reserves were also there.

When Lev stepped out from the bus in his space suit, he was met by strong applause.

Korovin looked well. His cheeks glowed with energy, as if his collapse the previous day were little more than a dream. "Good morning! Perfect weather for a rocket launch!"

"Chief, is your heart okay?"

To allay Lev's fears, Korovin thumped a fist on his chest and said, "For as far back as we can remember, people have dreamed of traveling to the ends of the skies above. Today, you take the first step toward achieving that dream. Soon, we can expect space tour tickets as prizes in the lottery!"

Lev was relieved to see Korovin back to his joking ways.

"Comrade Lev Leps." The committee chairman, who exuded an aura of cunning, stepped in front of Lev.

Lev stood at attention and saluted. "Private Second Class and Cosmonaut Lev Leps, sir! Preparations are complete!"

The chairman returned his salute with a satisfied smile. "Humanity's first spaceflight. This feat will be remembered for all eternity. We wish you luck."

As Lev's hand fell back to his side, a wave of people rushed in and crowded him, thrusting pens at him along with their worker IDs.

"Comrade! Your autograph, please!"

"Huh? My...autograph?"

Lev had never expected that. He waffled in a fluster until Lt. Gen. Viktor

tapped his helmet.

“Better get used to this. When you get back, it’ll be the same thing but with hundreds of millions of people around the world.”

“Understood, sir...”

Smiling warmly, Lev signed his name for the clustered engineers. At the same time, he couldn’t help but feel that Irina should have been signing her name, not him. The official photographer had snapped countless pictures of Lev but not a single photo of Irina in her space suit existed.

Lt. Gen. Viktor shouted to get everyone’s attention. “Comrades, the send-off! Take your seats!”

Just like Irina, Lev received the traditional Union send-off.

“Ready for launch!”

Lev headed for the rocket, showered in applause. People swarmed him with great fervor. Astronomers kissed his helmet, and engineers wailed as they cried.

He had been here on December 12, when the girl code-named Lycoris flew into space. He saw her silhouette now, like a phantom wrapped in the blue light of dawn. The improvements to the rocket Lev would ride were only possible because of risks she had taken in her own tests. Her body was proof that space was safe. He would only be following the path that she had carved before him.

The more Lev was praised and celebrated, the deeper the unfairness took root in his heart. Irina would be erased from history as a cosmonaut, and upon his return, she would become an engineer at the design bureau. It made Lev sick to his stomach.

Lev hugged the members of the Mechta Shest. As he shook Roza’s hand, she stared at him.

“You look down,” she remarked.

He laughed it off. “I’m just nervous, I guess...” His swelling feelings about Irina threatened to burst.

At the end of the line of well-wishers was Korovin, standing by the elevator that would take Lev to the cabin. Deep emotion was visible in the man’s face.

Lev remembered what Irina had said to him the day they parted. *“Wouldn’t it be great if a rocket I helped design took you to the moon one day?”*

Korovin was the only man who could lead a rocket launch to the moon. If Lev said something here, if he touched upon Irina’s confidential fate, there was a chance he’d be deemed mentally unwell and replaced by Mikhail. He’d lose his chance. Still, when Lev considered that he might never even make it back to Earth, he felt he had to say something. He moved close enough to Korovin that nobody else could hear.

“Take care of Irina when she joins the design bureau,” he said.

Korovin’s brow furrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“Huh? Irina said it was decided...at the committee meeting...”

The smile on Korovin’s face vanished. He shook his head silently.

“She was lying...?”

But why would she have done that? She’d told Lev about the design bureau just as he was reinstated as a cosmonaut candidate.

“Have you already forgotten what the Chief said? Are you really more concerned with me than your return to the candidate team?”

“When my physical examinations are done...I’m to put my experience to work as part of the design bureau.”

Did she lie to him just so he wouldn’t worry about what was going to happen to her? Was that why she’d said what she had right before they parted ways?

“I’ll be okay, so just focus on what’s ahead. We’ll meet again when you’re a cosmonaut...”

Suddenly, Lev understood it all. He looked at the sky. His belief that Irina was going to the design bureau had given him the strength and focus to enter his final examinations without distractions. Because of that, he was now here, about to fly in a rocket to space as a cosmonaut. But that was one thing, and this was another.

“Chief,” Lev said before he could stop himself. “What’s going to happen to her?”

Korovin's face hardened. "I am sorry, Lev, but I am little more than a factory chief given the responsibility of this launch site. I am not the one who decides her future." He glanced at the Delivery Crew vice-director, as if sending Lev a message.

Lev remembered the man. He'd had no joy in his eyes for Irina when she made her safe return to the cosmodrome. Anxiety bubbled up within him, and Korovin gripped his shoulders tightly.

"I promise you I will do what I can," he said, seeming to grasp what Lev meant when he'd mentioned that Irina had lied. "But listen to me, little ziland. The skies you have always longed for now await your arrival. Your dream, our dreams...and her dream too."

"Sir!"

Lev was ready.

All he could do now was focus on his responsibilities and see through his duty as a cosmonaut. If he made a mistake in his flight log or bungled his parachute landing, he'd become the butt of Irina's jokes forevermore.

He rode the elevator up to the cabin and thought back to her launch, remembering the moment when he saw her off. He'd watched her rise to the top of the rocket and vowed that one day, he too would fly.

That day was today. April 12.

The cabin attached to the top of the rocket with a loud clang. Voices shouted at him from below.

"Cosmonaut Lev Leps!"

People looked up at him enviously, waving.

I carry their dreams upon my shoulders.

Lev smiled and waved too.

"See you when I get back!" he called.

Then, he called out to Irina, far away in Sangrad, and sent a message from his heart.

I'll be a great cosmonaut, just as good as you were, and I will complete my duty. We will meet again, Lycoris.

It was seven thirty in the morning. The vast majority of Union citizens had finished their breakfast and were heading to work or school. On the other side of the planet, in the United Kingdom, most people settled in for a good night's sleep. Lev, meanwhile, waited inside a cramped cabin, listening to the quiet whir and groan of the bulbs and motors around him. Launch was in ninety minutes.

All the meters and gauges in the cabin were at nominal levels. Just as with Irina's flight, a little black dragon plushie hung from the ceiling. A small explosive was set near the cabin's closed entry hatch, allowing Lev to blow the door open in an emergency or during a failed flight.

Lev looked at the three windows of the cabin. What views would they share with him up in space?

Korovin sent a message from the blockhouse, a joke. *"Aster, this is Zarya. Emergency rations are in the flap. They are not to be consumed as snacks."*

Lev decided to respond in kind. "Not to worry, Zarya. Space food doesn't exactly whet the appetite."

"There's salami and sausage inside them."

"But what good are snacks if a man can't drink?"

"Zero gravity should be more than enough to get you feeling tipsy."

Lev heard laughter through the radio. Everyone seemed relaxed. They had been through this once before with Irina. Still, Lev's launch was not without danger. That was why he'd had to write a will.

The time till launch ticked down. Nervousness set in, and banter halted. It was 0841 hours.

"Fifteen minutes to launch, Aster."

"Understood."

Lev's heartbeat and pulse remained nominal. Gloves on, Lev closed the front visor of his helmet. Memories played in his mind alongside the ticking of the clock. He saw himself as a boy, leaping from a rooftop in a wooden plane. A younger Lev prattled on to his parents about trips to the moon. He wasn't going to the moon today, but he was about to fly through a world of the fantastic.

He was going to fly through outer space.

I don't want my parents to receive my will. I want them to get news of our success. And they will. They have to! I will not shatter the dreams I take with me. Irina's risks, her flight to space—none of it will be in vain.

No matter what happened when he got back from space, Lev wanted to see her. How would she look at him then? And what would happen to her? But just as that thought crossed his mind...

"Main engine ignition!"

A deafening roar engulfed his ears.

Concentrate, Lev!

His heart thumped harder. The rocket shook.

"Aster, give the order!"

"Understood. Ignition!"

"Preliminary combustion...intermediary combustion...main combustion..."

The tremors grew stronger.

"Launch!"

At that order from the blockhouse, there came the sound of supports releasing from the rocket. The engines roared. Lev's whole body vibrated with the noise. Flames spewed from the bottom of the rocket. All his senses were on high alert in case an emergency escape was needed. Every second felt like an eternity. And then...slowly, gradually, the rocket fought against gravity as it rose from the launchpad. The exact time was 09:06:59.7.

"Come on!" Lev shouted. *"Let's do this!"*

His body was pulled toward Earth as the rocket burst into the blue sky. The

cabin's engine, ventilation equipment, life support systems, and radio became a literal noise bath.

Space was still far overhead.

One minute passed. The rocket shook harder.

"Come in, Zarya," Lev said, struggling to speak as his cheeks were tugged tight. "This is Aster."

"This is Zarya," answered Korovin.

"Pilot in good condition. Flight going smoothly. Over."

"No problems here either. Everything is going as planned."

The equipment in the cabin remained at nominal levels. At 150 seconds into launch, the cover over one window came loose, and Lev saw planet Earth.

"I...I can see Earth. It's beautiful."

But Lev didn't have time to keep looking. His job was to maintain radio contact.

"Pilot still in good condition. All systems nominal."

His communications were short and frequent. He shared his condition, the status of the rocket, and what he spotted of the planet.

"I see a great river. The hills and valleys of Earth's surface and coastlines. A vast forest," he said, watching as it all grew smaller. "I see the horizon. White clouds. It's so beautiful."

Lev didn't have time to think. He spoke the words as they came to him and noted them as concisely as he could in the flight log. The rocket passed above his hometown, where his parents lived, completely unaware of his situation. They would receive official word upon his arrival in space.

Lycoris. Look up at the sky. I'm flying the path of stars you once crossed.

During the jettison of the first-stage engine, the rocket slowed for a moment, then picked up speed again. Gravity pushed harder against Lev's body.

"Zarya, this is Aster. I see clouds covering Earth."

This was where Irina had lost consciousness and communications stopped in December. But Lev made it through, thanks to his harsh training being smacked into a stone wall.

At 0921, Lev's body suddenly grew light. The black dragon floated in the air, and a pencil swam through space in front of him. Only his seatbelt kept him from rising out of his seat. Lev did everything he could to hold back his excitement at arriving in space.

"I have entered zero gravity!" he said to the radio.

The weight in his limbs was gone, and it was as if his body were no longer his own. He found the buoyancy utterly peculiar.

Irina's voice came to him then, and he heard her past radio message as if she were whispering it into his ear: *"Maybe I'm a little tipsy myself. I feel like I'm floating."*

"This is Zarya. Aster, please respond."

Lev snapped out of his daydream. He checked the cabin readings, then calmly replied.

"This is Aster. Humidity is at 65 percent, temperature at 20 degrees. Cabin is within nominal ranges. I'm starting to adapt to zero gravity. My body is incredibly light."

Then Lev looked out the window at the Earth.

"Whoa..."

The sight gripped his heart.

"The Earth. I can see the round shape of the Earth."

It was just as Irina had told him: *"It was wrapped in a transparent blue veil... and it was so beautiful."*

"It's wrapped in a transparent blue veil." His radio transmission was just like her words.

Irina had said: *"It was so strange to look at it and think 'That planet is my home.'"*

Lev's feelings were an echo of hers; they shared that reaction.

It was all exactly like Irina had told him when they'd waited in that snowy field. Space was no longer a world of the unknown.

Clouds spread shadows over a desert. The ocean was bathed in sunlight. A great river weaved through a rainforest. Lightning crackled in storm clouds.

Irina had seen all this scenery before Lev had. He knew this world through her words, despite having seen it in maps and photographs. Lev stopped writing in the flight log. What was the point? Wasn't Irina's log more than enough?

"This... I..."

The words left Lev's lips before he remembered he was still on the radio.

"Aster, is something wrong?" Korovin asked.

"Ah, no, I just... The scenery is so beautiful..."

Lev went on with his almost mechanical updates.

"The boundary between Earth and space—it's so beautiful."

Lev's radio transmissions were Irina's. His words in the flight log were hers. Now they were his too, but they truly belonged to history's first cosmonaut.

He continued his descriptions.

"Space is black. It's dark and black."

In Irina's eyes, the stars had resembled flowers. *"The stars were like flowers, like chervils."*

Lev had such respect for her ability to come up with such poetic descriptions. He never would have imagined them on his own. And yet...

"The stars, they're like flowers..." he said. "Like beautiful blooming chervils. They're sparkling."

Before he was aware of it, the words were already out of his mouth. He felt confused. Should he use Irina's words on the official record—she who was the first in history to see space herself? Or should he use his own?

The horizon changed from indigo to darker navy blue. A beautiful transparent

aurora covered the Earth. The sight before Lev's eyes was so divine, it seemed to lay his unworthiness bare.

Irina's words rang in his head like the whisper of a ghost. *"I could see the moon so clearly."*

"The moon... The moon..."

But the moon was nowhere to be seen. It was as if it hid from him.

"Sinus Iridum... Lacus Somniorum... Palus Somni..."

"I...I can't see the moon from here."

He wondered, *What am I...?* If God did exist out here in space, would He, She, They, or It punish him for acting as though he were history's first-ever cosmonaut?

"I thought, 'I really want to go to the moon.' And then I thought... 'I don't want to die, not yet...'"

The darkness of space seemed to penetrate the cramped, dim, solitary cabin. A contradictory feeling welled up in Lev at the memory of signing autographs at the launchpad.

What are those autographs worth? They're not even the signatures of history's first cosmonaut. I'm the second.

"Irina..." Lev called out to her, somewhere far off, hundreds of kilometers away.

From way up here, you shared memories of nastoyka and "My Beloved." When I heard your messages, the emotion struck me, and I felt warm. The words I speak now are not those you want from me, but those the world wants from me. I so desperately want you to know that I will not let your flight be forgotten. You are the real cosmonaut.

"Let's celebrate this success with aspic. I can't tell you how grateful I am," Lev said.

But the doubt that had taken root in his heart was spreading through his whole body. As Lev sat in zero gravity, his weightless body felt heavy.

Scarlet Eyes

• очи алый •

IT WAS 10:12 IN THE MORNING, approximately one hour after Lev's launch. A signal blared from the loudspeakers built into steel poles at street corners. An important announcement was coming.

"Attention! Breaking news from Sangrad!"

Citizens stopped in place, listening and waiting apprehensively.

The national broadcast went on to announce the first victory message. *"It is April 12, 1961. The country's first manned rocket, Mehta, has flown into space!"*

"Space? What?"

"Probably just more propaganda."

People were dubious, but the broadcast continued.

"The pilot of the rocket is a soldier from the Union, Major Lev Leps of the Zirnitran Air Force!"

Lev had been promoted two ranks midflight. When his name was called out, the crowd broke into excited murmurs.

"Wait, is this actually real...?"

People gathered where they could hear the broadcast. They started to smile as they looked at one another, their faces glowing red.

"Cosmonaut Major Lev Leps has made it to zero gravity and is in fine health. His flight continues as we deliver this message!"

Everyone looked up at the sky. All public transport stopped in place. As the message continued, everybody was glued to their radio or crowded near a broadcast area.

"A new era of space conquest has arrived!"

The people began to shout.

“Major Lev Leps!”

“Glory to the Union!”

Cries of victory rang out through the city. Passing air force officers found themselves suddenly hefted into the air by excited, passionate citizens.

“Glory to the Union’s air force!”

Strangers hugged and kissed on the streets. Teachers and students threw their textbooks in the air as the message was broadcast through schools.

“Classes are canceled!”

Everyone dashed outside, waving at the sky.

“Lev! Lev!”

Word crossed the nation in an instant, and people flooded into the city squares and gathering hubs of towns and villages alike in waves. Lev’s hometown, in the far eastern part of the country, buzzed like a beehive. Lev’s father was working the farm. Having heard nothing about or from his son, he didn’t even believe the news at first.

“My son’s not a major,” he said. “You’ve got the wrong man.”

He was utterly floored when a phone call from none other than the central committee members themselves arrived for him at the village’s communal telephone.

Lev’s mother brought her hands together and stared at the heavens, praying for her son’s safe return. “Please, whatever happens, bring him home safely...”

News of the manned spaceflight reverberated across the world. Questions flooded Union embassies in various countries, and the phone lines rang off the hook. In the United Kingdom, where it was still the dead of night, it was as if a bomb worse than any nightmare had dropped.

“Lev Leps!”

The private second class had, until just an hour ago, been completely unknown. Now he was a hero, his name carved into the annals of history.

People around the world cried out with joy. Lev had opened the doors to a new age.

“Glory to the Union! Glory to Lev Leps!”

“Hm?”

Irina was woken from her sleep by excited voices shouting outside her room in the Military Institute of Medical Science.

“Wha...? What’s going on?”

“Lev Leps! Lev Leps!”

“Lev?!!”

Feeling the change in the air, Irina rushed to her window and peeked through the curtains. The sunlight stung her eyes, but she soon forgot it, lost in the shocking scene spread out before her.

“Huh?”

Sangrad’s main street was an ocean of people, many holding flags and signs. At first, Irina couldn’t understand what had happened while she slept, but she glimpsed the word “space” written on a few signs.

“Is it really possible?” she asked in a whisper.

Then the door to her room burst open forcefully, and Anya stormed in.

“He...he...he did it!” Anya’s face was painted with disbelief. Her voice trembled as she spoke.

“He did what?!!”

“Lev! He’s flying through space right now!”

“Now?!!”

“Right now!”

Irina was so excited she could barely contain herself. “I’m going to the roof!”

She almost bowled Anya over as she ran out the door, still in her pajamas. The Delivery Crew agents in the hall were glued to the radio, staring out the

windows. She skirted around them, brushing past nurses and researchers listening to radios alongside patients at a loud enough volume for everyone to hear.

Irina's messy hair flew out behind her as she dashed through the halls. "Lev!"

Anya tumbled out of Irina's room and after her, carrying the young vampire's coat. "Irina! Wait!"

But Irina didn't even turn around, leaping up the stairs and bursting onto the hospital rooftop.

"Glory to the Union!"

"Major Lev Leps!"

The roof was full of people attempting to get just a little closer to the skies above. They waved flags, overwhelmed to the point of tears as they hugged each other tight.

Pure sunlight shone on Irina as she stared at the sky. Her skin and eyes stung as if she were a walking pincushion. She couldn't take the pain, and she hid in the shade of a water tower. That was where Anya found her. She was panting and out of breath, but she held out Irina's coat.

"Put it on," she said.

"Thank you..."

Irina tugged the coat on and pulled the hood over her head as she looked upward again. It was a clear blue sky, with no sign of spaceships. She knew she couldn't see the rocket, but still, she looked for it.

"Lev, is he really...flying?"

The radio blared a new update. *"Major Lev Leps is currently flying over the United Kingdom!"*

The citizens once again exploded with cries of joy, the city rumbling with their shouts.

"A victory for the Union!"

"A victory for humanity!"

“History’s first! The first cosmonaut! Lev! Lev!”

The voices were like waves crashing upon her. Lev had flown into space. His dream had come true.

“I’m so glad...”

Everybody was praising him, praising the Lev she’d grown to like so much. She was so glad she’d lied to him.

“Major Lev Leps!” said the voice over the radio. *“Glory to Lev Leps!”*

“Lev Leps! Lev Leps!”

Irina joined in the chanting.

“Lev Leps!” she cried. “Lev Leps!”

Her heart felt overwhelmed. Tears welled in her eyes. Anya looked at the sky, clapping her hands happily. Irina could feel the whole city celebrating Lev’s achievement, and she was overjoyed. At the same time, another feeling snuck up on her, something that hadn’t even crossed her mind until this moment.

She laughed at herself and whispered in Anya’s ear. “When I went to space, the best we got was canned food in secret.”

“I remember...” Anya said, an awkward smile on her face.

Irina hadn’t wanted some human celebration when she got back from space, but her heart and mind couldn’t handle the sheer difference in how she’d been treated then and how Lev was being treated now.

“A round of applause for this victory for humanity! For history’s first cosmonaut!”

Thunderous applause filled the city, and Irina felt suddenly, strangely, completely alone. *What am I...?*

“Major Leps has spoken! He says the world is wrapped in a transparent blue veil!”

That’s what I said.

“He says the stars are like beautiful blooming chervils!”

I said that too. You didn't know what a chervil was. Why are you just saying what I said?

"Lev..." Irina felt envy and jealousy take hold of her, and she shook her head. No!

She called out to him, somewhere far off, hundreds of kilometers away. You're sharing my words, aren't you? You're giving them to the world, right?

"He says we can all celebrate this success with aspic!"

I knew it. That's what I cooked him. He won't forget me. I can't tell anyone what I did, but he can share my words. My feelings. My flight log will be lost to flames, but he can find a place for those words to remain...

My radio transmissions will be erased... Nothing will be left...

What will happen to me? Will I just vanish?

Will we never be able to go to the moon together...?

Will they kill me...?

I don't want to die.

"Help me..."

As the words slipped from Irina's lips, all the fear and uncertainty she'd kept locked at the bottom of her heart surged out of her. She couldn't stop it, couldn't hold it in. Tears streamed from her eyes. Her heart ached. It hurt so much that she struggled to breathe.

Irina sobbed. She crouched and bit her lip, but it was no use. As much as she didn't want to cry, the tears refused to stop. She hated this part of herself—the crybaby. She pulled her hood over her head, hiding her face. She didn't want anyone to see her.

"Waaaah..."

She felt the sun burn her hands...and then gentle warmth on top of them. Peeking from under her hood, she saw Anya looking down at her, clasping her hands.

"What? What do you want?"

Anya stepped closer to Irina and sat down with her, shading her from the sunlight. “Are you okay?”

Irina turned her gaze away and shrank further into herself. “I hate it...when people look at me like that...”

Her voice was weak, and it trembled. Her tears fell to the ground below. She wanted to disappear, to be even smaller than she was—and suddenly, she felt Anya’s arms wrap around her in a hug.

“Ah...” Irina’s surprise left her in a short gasp.

She heard Anya’s warm voice in her ear. “That was your aspic he was talking about, the aspic we made him... I’m so happy he remembered.”

“L-Like I care...”

Irina wanted to be stubborn, but the tears kept coming. She stayed there sobbing, trembling, wrapped in the warmth of Anya’s gentle breaths and the beating of her heart.

“I know how hard you worked, Rina... I wanted your celebration to be so much more than canned food. Sorry... All I can do is be here to eat with you and talk with you... I’m so sorry...”

Irina wanted to tell her, *That’s more than enough. I’ll always be grateful for you.*

Even since Lev had left, Anya was always there for her. She’d made Irina so happy when they celebrated the New Year together. It was also because of Anya that Irina had gotten her date with Lev. Every day since they came to Sangrad, Anya had been there for their walks. Irina knew that without Anya, she would have crumbled and broken during all the tests and exams. She never could have coped if she’d been left on her own.

Thanks to Anya, she was here, now, on the day Lev became a cosmonaut. Irina wanted to tell the girl how she felt, but her crying got in the way. Her voice shook, and the words didn’t come.

So, she hugged Anya back. She held her so tight that Anya could feel her message through her arms.

Thank you.

Everybody continued to stare into the sky, unaware of the two girls crouched beneath the water tower.



“Cosmonaut Major Lev Leps! Glory to the major!”

Only those girls sank into the shadows as the world filled with the light of new hope.

Chapter 7:

Hero of the Motherland

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

LEV'S PARACHUTE DESCENDED through clear blue skies. He landed safely. His trip through space had lasted a total of 108 minutes.

"Phew... I made it. I'm back." Lev's relief at his safe return outshone the joy of his trip through space.

An old woman and a young girl working fields nearby watched him anxiously. The young girl was so scared, she hid behind a cow. Lev was still clad in his space suit. He took his helmet off and pointed at the sky.

"Please don't be scared," he said. "I just came back from space."

The frightened old woman squinted to look at him more closely. "You... Are you that one from the radio... Mr. Lev?"

"That's me. Lev Leps."

"The first cosmonaut, Lev Leps?"

"Uhh... Well..." Lev was hesitant to ignore Irina's efforts and claim he was first.

"Wow! Comrade Leps?!" the girl squealed.

"Erm, yes, that's me."

"Everyone! Get over here! It's the cosmonaut! The real thing! It's the real Lev Leps!"

At first, the young girl's shouts only caused people nearby to share doubtful gazes. Within a few moments, however, they abandoned their farming tools to run over and see for themselves.

Lev knew he was a hero to these people, so he put his reluctance aside and

smiled. “Hello, comrades. I’m the cosmonaut Lev Leps.”

“Comrade! Glory to the motherland!”

Lev found himself suddenly surrounded by farmers, all of whom clamored for handshakes, autographs, or photographs. A few minutes later, an air force truck zoomed in at high speed, and a few military personnel jumped from it.

“Major Lev Leps!” one shouted.

“Major? But I’m—”

He was about to tell them he was just a private but stopped himself. He realized there was a chance he’d been promoted during his flight. The military personnel gathered the farmers.

“Did you see the landing?” asked an officer.

The old woman nodded happily. “We did! He parachuted down and—”

“He did not parachute down! He came down in his rocket ship! Are we clear?”

They were already moving to take control of the narrative.

Lev was taken to the nearest air force base, where he reported his safe arrival to First Secretary Gergiev by way of the officers’ phone. If he’d gone back in time and told himself as a reserve that one day he’d be on the phone with Gergiev himself, he never would have believed it. However, it was no dream.

On the other end of the line, Gergiev’s voice was calm and composed. “My dear Lev Leps, it is my greatest pleasure to hear from you after your historic spaceflight.”

Reminding himself that the call was being recorded, Lev chose his next words carefully. “That I completed my duties safely is all thanks to the support of my comrades.”

Gergiev listened as Lev ran through his flight report, marveling at each detail and praising him. “Comrade Leps, your name will be carved into history for all eternity. You are the first human ever to fly through space.”

It sounded like an overstatement, an exaggeration, yet it was true. As long as

the human race did not go extinct, Lev's flight through space would be talked about for thousands, if not tens of thousands, of years. Still, the thought of it being *his* name people recollected left Lev uncomfortable once more.

At the conclusion of their phone call, Gergiev informed Lev that a huge celebration would be held in Sangrad to commemorate his triumphant return.

"The event is scheduled for the day after tomorrow, the fourteenth. We can expect hundreds of thousands of our people to be there. The world must mark your meritorious feats!"

After finishing on the phone, Lev dressed in an all-new military uniform complete with major's epaulets. He then flew to the farming city of Volshev for rest and post-flight examinations.

Lev's schedule was carefully controlled down to the minute, and he still hadn't had a chance even to contact his parents. When he mentioned that to the military officer acting as his guide, the man brushed his worries aside in a single comment: "The two of them will attend the celebration."

Lev had a feeling that meant the government intended to use them as part of the show—a grand reunion in front of the nation's citizenry.

What was going to happen now that he'd returned? Did Irina know about his flight?

Questions Lev could not answer whirled in his mind. He looked out the window to the swampland scenery. Nothing had changed since he left for space, yet his heart and body felt heavier after returning.

The Volshev airfield was packed with thousands of people who had heard about Lev's scheduled arrival, and the military was sent to keep the situation under control. People held up signs or wrote messages on their clothing welcoming the nation's new hero.

ZIRNITRA UNION, SPACE NATION

VICTORY!

SPACE IS OURS!

Lev was the center of attention, and he smiled at everyone, waved, and signed his name when asked. That was exactly what he had to do, now that he was a cosmonaut carrying the hopes and dreams of the Union's people.

The more he was praised and celebrated, however, the more the seed of doubt in Lev's heart grew.

Lev was taken to a quiet dacha by the riverside to avoid the big, rowdy banquet celebration. Guards kept watch over the grounds, and anyone who dared to come close was quickly sent packing.

In the cottage's spacious bedroom, Lev felt like he could finally take a break. He indulged in a luxurious meal without eating any space food whatsoever and had his first sip of zhizni in several months. The taste was like life returning to his weary body.

As he underwent medical examinations, however, the evening news began, and it brought with it waves that rocked the calm in his heart.

The newscaster was ecstatic. "We have recorded comments from space from humanity's first cosmonaut, Major Lev Leps!"

Soon after, Lev heard his voice, combined with light static.

"It's wrapped in a transparent blue veil."

"The stars, they're like flowers... Like beautiful blooming chervils. They're sparkling."

The newscaster returned on-screen, smiling ear to ear. "Celebratory messages are flooding the prime minister's office from around the world. Many children born on this historic day have been named Lev!"

Lev wanted to block his ears. He felt as if each radio transmission and word of celebration carved away at his very soul.

"You look pale," said a doctor. "Are you okay?"

Lev quickly pulled himself together. "I...I'm just a little tired, I think. I'm not used to this kind of attention..."

The doctor laughed. “Well, that’s because you’re the first one to receive it. Nobody else has gone to space before!”

More laughter filled the cottage. Lev felt a sudden urge to reveal the truth, but he knew that if he did, he’d be locked in a solitary ward “because his condition had deteriorated upon his return.” The doctors must have noticed the grave expression on his face because they soon called for quiet.

“All right, that’s enough, everyone. Let’s give the hero his much-needed rest. He’s got a busy schedule tomorrow.”

Everyone celebrated with quick cheers and drinks before emptying the room, leaving Lev alone.

He reminded himself that he had a role to play and a duty to fulfill. He didn’t want anyone saying that Mikhail or Roza would’ve been a better choice. If that happened, he wouldn’t be able to look them in the eye. Not them, not the people who chose him in the first place, and certainly not Irina.

The day after the flight, the excitement and commotion showed no signs of dying down. If anything, the rest of the world was being drawn in, and things were heating up. The United Kingdom’s heads of state held an emergency press conference, admitting defeat upon hearing the “terrible” news. *Arnack News* criticized the government: “Our country was snuggled up in bed, dreaming away, while the Union was out there making its dreams a reality.”

Pictures of Lev and announcements of victory were plastered all over the Union’s newspapers. However, there were no photos of Korovin, the man who’d put the most into the project. His name wasn’t even brought up. Instead, the newspapers only mentioned him in passing; for instance, in a throwaway line that ended in “...thanks to the efforts of the chief designer.” Even now that the project was a confirmed success, Korovin was still a tightly kept national secret.

Lev sat on a leather sofa in an office reading a copy of *The Istina*. For a moment, he considered Irina and Korovin’s circumstances one and the same, but he quickly realized they were fundamentally different. While Korovin was an indispensable genius the Union could not do without, Irina could disappear

now that her flight was over, and it would have almost no impact on anyone at all.

“Pull it together, Lev!” he said to himself, tossing the paper across the room in frustration.

Lev picked up a copy of his flight log to prepare for the interview scheduled after lunch. A press conference was being arranged for world media outlets, but today was purely for *The Istina* and the National Broadcasting Service. Everything Lev said would spread across the world as the official record, so it was of the utmost importance that he make no mistakes.

Memories of the launch rose to the top of his mind while he reviewed his flight log. As he found himself basking in the feelings he remembered from his spaceflight, he felt like he saw Irina’s script overlaid on his own. Lev sighed and fell back against the sofa.

He was so worried, he couldn’t stop thinking about her. The more he did, the more anxious he grew about where she was and what she was doing. It had gotten so bad that he yearned to blame the effects of zero gravity.

If she isn’t going to be employed in the design bureau, where are they going to take her?

Lev hung his head as he held the flight log in front of him.

A knock sounded at the door. “I’m coming in.”

Lev knew the deep voice well. The door opened, and Korovin shuffled inside, disguised with a cap pulled low. He lifted the brim of his cap and grinned at Lev.

“Chief!”

Lev leaped to his feet and trotted over to Korovin. It had only been a day, yet he felt like it had been years. They embraced with a strong hug and congratulated each other on their shared success.

“You did it! I knew you could fly, zilant!”

“Aw, Chief...!”

Korovin’s bloodshot eyes welled with tears as he looked at Lev. “I can tell you now that we found weaknesses during Irina Luminesk’s launch, and for a time,

we fell into despair. But you did it. You came back. Thank you.” His wide smile made the corners of his eyes wrinkle.

Lev wanted to ask if anything had changed for Irina, but he and Korovin had talked briefly before launch, and the man hadn’t been able to help. He also didn’t want to spoil this moment of happiness for Korovin, who had finally seen his dream come true after many long years. Lev trusted that if something happened to Irina, Korovin would let him know, so he kept quiet.

Still, it wasn’t just Irina he was worried about.

“What about Mikhail, Roza, and the others? How are they?”

“They’re all happy. They want to see you, but until they fly, they are just anonymous air force privates. They cannot come here without raising suspicion, so they will attend your celebration in Sangrad as part of the crowd. As will I. I’m glad I got to see you before then, but for now, I must be off.”

Korovin wrapped Lev in another bear hug, then began to leave.

“Chief, I...”

“What is it?”

Lev pointed at the newspaper. “They didn’t write a thing about you,” he said.

He knew it was political, but he felt guilty being the only one splashed across the media.

Korovin laughed in response. “I don’t care about that. If giving them my face increased our budget, I’d publish my own photo collection! Besides, I am still in the process of chasing my dreams. I want to see humanity’s first spacewalk. I want to send people to the moon, and then Mars. I want to build a space station and a lunar base. Once I do those things, perhaps I’ll let them commemorate me with a statue!”

Korovin and Irina had both used the political system to make their dreams reality. Irina hadn’t even wanted to be famous. Had she ever wished to see herself on the cover of a newspaper with a big headline saying, “I WANTED TO BEAT HUMANS TO SPACE”?

Lev was lost in thought. When Korovin pinched his cheek, it yanked him back

to reality. "Ouch!"

"You wish to reunite with Lycoris, is that not so, Aster?"

"Uh..."

"You are as clear as glass," Korovin chuckled.

"I know..." Lev hung his head.

Korovin took out a cigarette. "Last night, I tried pressuring Comrade Gergiev into seeing my point of view, but he didn't budge," he said. "I doubt I can do much else."

"I understand..."

Judging by the dejected look on Korovin's face, his hands were just as tied as Lev's. Still, Lev was grateful to him. The man had made time to find out about Irina, although he had his own hectic schedule to deal with.

A bitter expression washed across Korovin's features as he lit his cigarette. "I did tell you, didn't I? About the sacrifices this life would bring."

Lev remembered his words.

"Should you graduate and become history's first cosmonaut, you will bear that responsibility for the rest of your life. The words that come out of your mouth will no longer just be your own. You will be devoting your life to our motherland, and that may involve sacrificing your connections with those you love. Are you prepared for that?"

While Lev hadn't taken those words lightly, he had never imagined this kind of pressure crushing him. He still felt worried and lost.

Korovin stared straight at him. "Do you know why I recommended you as our first cosmonaut?"

"No, I don't."

"Because I deemed you capable of bearing the responsibility, and of leading the world into a new age."

"Me? But..."

Lev felt a cold sweat break out on his back. Everything was suddenly so much

larger than he was ready for.

“Zilant,” said Korovin with a kind smile, “I look forward to the celebrations.”

And then he left.

“Sacrifices...”

Lev thought about it for a time, but it was like walking through a maze with no exit. Besides, he had an interview to prepare for. He picked the flight log back up. If he didn’t want to disappoint the reporters, he’d have to play his role—a hero people could admire, the sort of person the public expected history’s first cosmonaut to be.

Play a role, huh?

A self-deprecating chuckle fell from his lips. He wasn’t even sure who he *was* anymore.

Lev’s interviews began in the afternoon.

“As a fellow citizen of the Union, let me just say it’s such an honor to be the first to talk to you. You’re a hero of the people!”

The reporters couldn’t hide their enthusiasm, which dripped from their voices. They stank of liquor, and Lev imagined they’d done their fair share of toasting the nation’s victory.

Awe, respect, and envy danced on the *Istina* reporter’s face as Lev described his experiences during the flight—the excitement and nerves, the scenery from the window, the feeling of zero gravity. Lev said nothing about the cosmodrome or the actual rocket, as those were considered military secrets. He was also forbidden to mention that he’d written a will.

The reporter leaned forward, peppering him with questions. “And what’s space like?!”

Lev spoke slowly, so as not to make any mistakes. “It was incredibly dark. Pitch-black. The stars are hundreds of times brighter than they look from Earth. They truly sparkle up there.”

“How did the Earth look?!”

“It’s surrounded in blue. It shines as if covered in a blue veil.”

Lev felt a pang of guilt at once again using Irina’s words as his own.

As his heart grew cold, the reporter heated up. “So, the Earth is blue! What about the moon?!”

“Unfortunately, I couldn’t see it. But I have a feeling it’s right there, waiting for our arrival.”

Lev’s smile never left his lips, but it never made its way to his indigo eyes either. The interview continued without pause, and the reporter finally began to run out of questions.

“You heard the rumors about Captain Susnin?”

“Everyone on the Mehta Shest team had a good laugh over it. Little more than the fantasies of the space-drunk, I think.”

As he answered, Lev had to wonder—what would the world do if they found out about Irina? He was certain the government would have her quietly disposed of and then claim it was all misinformation. Even if Lev did tell the *Istina* reporter that the real first cosmonaut was a young female vampire, his answer would be censored and erased. There was no point trying.

“Okay, last question. You’ve conquered space, and you’re the hero of hundreds of thousands of people. Do you have anything you’d like to say to your comrades, and to the readers of *The Istina*?”

Did they really just say “conquered space”...? Talk about an exaggeration.

Lev chuckled on the inside but maintained a straight face. “We achieved our dreams of spaceflight thanks to our nation’s tremendous scientific knowledge.”

Roza’s words flashed through his mind: *A honey tongue, a heart of gall.*

That was exactly what he’d become.

When the interviews were finally over, Lev was allowed a short walk to relax, but bodyguards still surrounded him. He was hoping for a quiet stroll by the

lake as the sun set, but there were so many people gathering like ants—all of them space-drunk. They shouted, called for autographs, and loaded him with more food than he could possibly carry; none of it was relaxing in the slightest.

By the time he made it back to the dacha, Lev was exhausted. He was taken aback by the woman there waiting for him, who sat in a garden chair eating ice cream. It was Lyudmila, decked out in a black suit.

“Long time no see,” she said. “I told you I’d see you again when the cosmonaut was decided, didn’t I?”

“What do you want?”

Lev was tired and on edge. He couldn’t read Lyudmila, so he kept his guard up around her.

Lyudmila read his expression and pouted, pointing at him with her ice cream. “You remember my job, of course? I’m the speechwriter for our Supreme Leader. I’m here to help you write your speech for the grand celebration. First, we have the flight report meeting with Comrade Gergiev at the airport. After that, we’ll move to the Neglin’s city square, where you’ll give a victory speech to a crowd of two hundred thousand people.”

Lev and Lyudmila headed to the cottage’s office, where she showed him a document.

“Congratulations,” she said. “You’ve been awarded two new titles.”

There was Lev’s name in showy print, along with a pair of gold-star medals. He’d received the Union’s highest honor, “Hero of the Zirnitra Union.” A brand-new title had also been established to honor his achievement: “Cosmonaut of the Zirnitra Union.” Lev grew dizzy at the weight of the awards. He felt too young for such honors.

Meanwhile, Lyudmila casually rifled through the celebratory gifts piled in the corner of the room. “They’ll also erect a bronze statue of you in Sangrad and a commemorative plaque at your landing site. They’re producing celebratory medals and a run of ten million stamps and postcards. Additionally, there are plans to publish a book on you and have it translated all over the world.”

“Uh, okay...” Lev could only nod along.

“Now, let’s make sure to write a speech befitting a national hero. This celebration is something of a historical first for the Union; it’s going to be a live global broadcast.”

“Did you say ‘global’?”

“Oh, and it’ll play over the radio for places without televisions. That’s around three billion people watching and listening in. Sends a shiver down your spine, doesn’t it?”

Unlike Lyudmila, who wore an ear-to-ear grin, Lev felt something sour crawl up from his stomach.

“Come on, get to writing,” Lyudmila said. “Don’t worry, I’ll help sharpen it up.”

She sat off to the side, eating snacks and fruit as she read the newspaper. Lev stared at the blank white page in front of him, pencil in hand, thinking about what to write.

But the pencil never moved.

Every time he tried to start with a line like “As history’s first...” or “On this historical occasion...” he thought of Irina, weeping in the field in the midst of that snowstorm. At one point, he realized he’d written “Cosmonaut Irina Luminesk,” and had to quickly erase the words.

The longer Lev tried to write a heroic speech praising his nation, the more reservations he had. He stole a glance at Lyudmila. As Gergiev’s right hand, surely she knew what was happening to Irina. If the vampire girl was still in the Sangrad hospital, that would put her right next to the square where the celebration was set to take place. Could he ask whether Irina would come to see it?

Lyudmila opened a box of chocolates and looked at Lev. “What are you staring at? You want something to eat?”

Unable to express his honest concerns, Lev said, “Er, yes. I am a bit hungry.”

“Fine, have some of this,” she said, passing Lev a little chocolate. “Something

sweet might get those writing cogs turning in your brain.” Then she swiftly swiped his paper.

“Ah, I haven’t finished—”

“You write, I’ll edit.”

Lyudmila grinned as she started reading the speech, but her eyebrow twitched when she got partway through, and her expression hardened as she followed the rest with her finger.

“If this were a test, you’d fail.” Lyudmila crumpled the paper into a ball and went on. “I don’t feel nearly enough gratitude in these words for our Supreme Leader *or* the nation. Mikhail would have done a much better job.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

She was exactly right. Lev’s head drooped. He picked up his pencil and was about to start a second attempt when Lyudmila fixed him with a suspicious glare.

“By the way, I see you dropping into little daydreams as you write. Are you worried about her? Irina Luminesk, I mean.”

Lev nearly staggered. It was like Lyudmila had read his mind.

“I...well, no... Why would I be?”

“She’s dead.”

“What?”

“She’s dead.”

There was no emotion in Lyudmila’s voice; it was like she was reading from a bland report. Lev felt lost.

“The Delivery Crew mixed cyanide into her breakfast this morning. They cut off her head as she vomited blood, and they ran a stake through her heart to make sure she wouldn’t come back. They put the corpse in its coffin, burned it, and buried the ashes deep in the earth. There is no trace of the girl’s existence.”

Lev’s mind went blank. His blood froze, and his breath caught in his throat.



Irina...is dead.

Lyudmila burst into laughter.

“Wh-wha...?”

“I’m joking.”

“You’re...what?”

Lyudmila continued to giggle as Lev sat there, dumbfounded.

“I was lying. She’s alive.”

Anger welled up in the pit of Lev’s stomach. “How *dare* you!”

He kicked the chair away and jumped to his feet. Instantly, Lyudmila pulled a gun from her jacket and pointed it directly at him. Shock sent a shudder of fear through Lev’s body. Lyudmila’s eyes pierced straight through him. They were wrapped in darkness, not unlike those of a soldier who’d returned from a fierce warzone.

“Sit.”

Lev seethed with anger, but he did as he was told. Lyudmila placed the gun back in its holster and giggled. Just like that, she returned to her usual self.

“But it wasn’t *totally* a lie,” she added. “The topic of a death sentence has been raised. Sooner or later, the Delivery Crew will probably get their way. They’re like killing machines; no sympathy whatsoever.”

As much as Lev wanted to unleash his rage upon Lyudmila, he took a deep breath and calmed himself. “What’s going to happen to her?” he asked.

“You’ve completely forgotten the rule about treating the test subject as an object, haven’t you?”

“I won’t stand for her erasure.”

“It’s how the country operates. Keep things clean by disposing of whatever’s unnecessary. But you knew that already, didn’t you?”

Lev thought of his teacher, who’d been erased just for speaking out against the war. Pain lanced his heart. The people who mattered to him were being

snuffed out because the nation deemed them unnecessary. How could he possibly write a speech full of praise and gratitude for a country like that? How could he accept their greatest honors?

His lips pursed, and fiery rage burned in his gut.

Unfazed, Lyudmila popped a chocolate into her mouth. “Your life changed yesterday. More specifically, it changed the moment you became humanity’s first cosmonaut. That became your life’s responsibility.”

So, while he lived as a hero, Irina would quietly vanish behind the curtain. And if he didn’t dance for them, he’d be staring down the barrel of a gun.

Was there really no other way?

Lyudmila smiled at Lev as he grit his teeth. “That responsibility has perks, of course. Next month, you’ll get to travel the world. Try all the food each country has to offer. Ooh, and think of the beautiful women you’ll meet!”

But Lev didn’t want any of that. He pushed his anger deep down inside, gripping the pencil tightly in his hand. Lyudmila watched him all the while, then tilted her head slightly and leaned toward him.

“Do you remember what I said I wanted in a cosmonaut?”

“A revolutionary. Someone to lead us into the new world.”

“Ah, so you do remember.”

Lyudmila put a record on the phonograph in the corner of the room. It was a symphonic piece called “The New World.”

“Visiting space, visiting a whole new world, gave you the power to lead people. Succeed in your revolution, and you’re a hero; fail, and you’re a traitor. Your words can be sweet like chocolate or as poisonous as lycoris leaves. I wonder which you’ll choose?” Lyudmila snickered. “Just don’t forget that I’m editing your speech.”

There was something of a devilish temptation in her words.

“I’ll be back when the record stops playing,” she said, leaving the room with her box of chocolates in hand.

Great, fluid power emanated from the symphony, evoking an image of dawn.

“How does she just throw words around like that? Revolutionary...”

Lev stared at the sheet of paper on the desk, but he just couldn't dredge up words of praise for the Union. In contrast, the symphony grew ever more enthusiastic, rising as if to lift its listeners' hearts.

“Irina... What do I do?”

He was being forced to give a speech, an invisible gun at his back, to three billion people worldwide. When he imagined that, an idea floated to the surface of his mind.

“A gun?”

Lev was terrified. This idea, this plan, would require even more willpower than spaceflight. He was contemplating revolution...at the risk of his own life.

The brass instruments trumpeted as if to possess Lev, and he scrawled his speech with manic fervor, ignoring the fact that Lyudmila would revise it. Then, as the music slowed between movements, his hand stopped.

“I can't do it...”

When he thought about it calmly, it was little more than an exercise in self-satisfaction. He would only cause trouble for his friends and his family.

It wasn't revolutionary. It was terrorism.

Lev crumpled up the speech and thrust the frightening thought out of his mind.

Scarlet Eyes

• **очи алый** •

ON THE EVE of the great celebration, Sangrad buzzed with hundreds of thousands of people from all across the country. The streets bubbled with drinks and chatter, loud with singing and dancing. Normally, the police would

come down hard on this behavior, but tonight they were a little lax.

Preparations around the square continued into the night. The main stage was the mausoleum, and opposite it, gigantic paintings of Lev hung from the walls of the state-run department store. Model rockets as tall as churches were also hurriedly erected.

The whole city of Sangrad seemed to float in a pleasant ocean of space-drunkenness, but amidst it all, Irina remained locked in her private room.

She sighed, tossing and turning inside her coffin. She fingered the creases in her sheets aimlessly. It had been a day and a half since Lev's flight, and she still couldn't get her feelings in order.

As much as she wanted to celebrate Lev's flight through space, she was frightened of the unknown future before her. Ever since Lev's return, both her daily tests and walks had stopped completely.

Irina wanted to know how Lev felt—how he *really* felt.

When she heard his transmissions from space or saw his smiling face in the newspaper, she felt her heart caught in a vise. The further he was out in front of the world as its new hero, the more she felt her own existence slip away. She understood that there wasn't much that could be done about it, and that the Nosferatu Project could not be publicized, but still her heart ached.

Oh, Lev... You haven't forgotten me, have you?

That was all she wanted to ask. She didn't want to be famous. She didn't want praise or admiration. She just wanted a place in Lev's heart, even if history erased her from its records. To her, that was everything.

But her hopes went unanswered, and the victory celebration that would be held so close to the hospital only depressed her. It was set to draw at least two hundred thousand people to the city square. Since it was scheduled to start at one thirty, the noise of it all was sure to wake her even if she wanted to sleep.

She worried that here, in this cage of a room, she might grow to hate him. After all, she'd be subjected to endless praise and celebration of his efforts, and she would have to listen to a speech that mentioned nothing of her existence. There would never be a chance to see him again, not after he became a hero for

the entire world to look up to.

And so she wanted to see him one last time and talk to him face-to-face. She wanted to say “Welcome home,” just as he’d said to her upon her return.

If she could just ask him how he felt, she could accept being erased. But that was impossible. Without permission, she would never be allowed out of her room.

At nine in the evening, Anya brought Irina’s meal right on schedule. As always, it was a simple affair of bread and milk. Boisterous, drunken voices chanting and singing leaked into the room as Irina and Anya ate in silence. Since her episode on the rooftop, Irina felt so embarrassed that she couldn’t look Anya in the eye. She’d lost her appetite too, so she sipped gingerly at her milk.

Anya put a carrot on a round slice of bread and looked at it. “This brings back memories,” she whispered.

“Of what?”

“Of when we were in LAIKA44, and I found that flipbook you drew of a rocket going to the moon.”

Irina remembered her awful drawings and began to sweat. “Just forget about it, would you?”

“I... Okay.” Anya stopped. She did not reach for her food, and her mood darkened.

Irina suddenly felt an ominous rush in her heart. A bad feeling crept up inside her. “What’s wrong?”

Anya stared at her bread, her voice trembling with tears. “They’re relieving me of my position as your supervisor. I’ll only be here until tomorrow...”

Irina jerked forward. “What?! But that’s so soon!”

Anya hung her head apologetically. “My contract stated that my time here would last until the success of the manned flight...”

First Lev had left, and now another person Irina cared about was being taken

away. She was riddled with doubt and fell back in her chair.

“What’s...what’s going to happen to me?”

Anya kept her eyes on the floor as she shook her head. “I asked my superior, but he said it’s undecided. Unconfirmed...”

When Irina was summoned to the central committee meeting last December, they’d supposedly decided she would receive “a cozy dacha in a resort location.” She hadn’t believed a word of it. Instead, a different fate flashed through her mind.

Disposal.

Even if, through some twist of fate, Irina was allowed to live in a dacha, she would never be free. She would live the rest of her life under the careful watch of the Delivery Crew.

The two girls sat for a time without a word. Outside, revelers bellowed the national anthem. Irina couldn’t dispel the gloom settling in her chest—the hunch that she might die tomorrow. But if she was going to die, she wanted to leave something behind. Something for *him*.

She thought back on the seasons she’d spent with Lev, and she decided to give him the treasure she’d held dear for so, so long.

“Anya, can I ask you to do something for me?”

“What is it?”

Irina went to the shelf where she hid the lunny kamen, her necklace. She took it and placed it on the table in front of Anya.

“I want you to give this to Lev. Tell him it’s a gift to commemorate the occasion.”

He’d refused to take it from her last time, but she hoped he would understand now. Irina simply had no chance of getting to the moon herself.

“Please, Anya.”

But Anya didn’t touch the necklace, and when she looked up at Irina, there was great conviction in her eyes.

“You should give it to him yourself,” she said.

I would if I could, but...

“How? It’s impossible. They’re always watching. I can’t move without them following me.”

Even when she’d simply called out to Lev from the city square, Delivery Crew agents had stopped her. Yet Anya still refused to take the necklace.

“You were the first ever to travel to the stars,” the girl said, confidence filling her voice. “You’ve seen it yourself; you made the impossible possible.”

“But...”

“If we can’t get permission, we’ll do it anyway. We’ll find a way. Look, I was here in January for the military parade. There were gaps in security; people were running out along with the parade, and drunks even tried to clamber onto the main stage.”

“Think about what you’re saying, An—”

Irina started to speak, but Anya raised her fork aloft and stabbed it into a potato.

“I am outraged!” she cried.

“Huh?!” Anya’s anger took Irina completely aback. “I-I’m sorry. Really, I am!”

“No, not at you! At this nation! Why can’t we be free to love?!”

“L-Love, you say...?” Irina was overwhelmed.

Anya thrust the necklace back into Irina’s hands. “Don’t you want to see him again?”

Irina stared down at the jewel she held.

“Are you sure you want things to end like this?” Anya continued. “To just end in tears, like last time?”

The words were like a knife through Irina’s chest. She hadn’t been able to tell Lev how she felt. Instead, she’d gone on lying about her own feelings. She’d wanted to tell him when they were in that snowy field. She’d wanted to tell him how she felt as she looked at the moon, but she never did. She had thought

that she'd only make things harder for him—make it harder for him to be around her, a detested vampire. But now...

Irina clenched the necklace in her fist. She couldn't let it end like this.

"I want to see him," she said. "I want to talk to him."

"Then let's make it happen," Anya insisted, her expression quickly turning to a tactician's. "Here's what we know. Hospital staff will also watch the victory celebration. The Delivery Crew will have their hands full running security for visitors and VIPs. This being a military hospital, there are powerful sedatives and laxatives here..."

"Are you serious?" Irina whispered. "You're saying we should break out?"

Determination was knitted into Anya's expression. She nodded somberly. "Come tomorrow, those drunks won't just be bellowing songs. They'll be much rowdier. Nobody's going to be able to find you in a crowd of two hundred thousand."

"But if you do this, you'll—"

Anya put a finger to Irina's lips to stop her mid-sentence. "We'll be fine as long as we don't get caught. Besides, when I see you and Lev really give it everything you've got, I know I have to do my best too."

"Oh, Anya..."

"You're the one who decides, Irina. But I'll back you up with everything I have."

Irina stared at Anya's serious, determined gaze. "Why would you do this for me?"

Anya grinned. "Because Lev asked me to. When I took over as supervisor, he said, 'While I'm away, please be there for Irina when she needs you.'"

Irina nodded, fighting back a flood of feelings threatening to surge forth.

Black Dragon's Eyes

• **очи цирнитра** •

GERGIEV DRANK ZHIZNI in an office of the Ministerial Cabinet. He was on the phone with Lyudmila, who was still watching over Lev.

“How is he?”

“I think the gun helped set him straight. But rest assured, I have prepared countermeasures for every situation, however sudden.”

On the other end of the line, Lyudmila was snacking on something. It hardly bothered Gergiev, however. He trusted her implicitly; she could do whatever she wanted so long as she got her job done. All the same, this particular situation had him on edge.

“And the Delivery Crew?”

“It seems they’re moving ahead with the execution on their own authority. They intend to use the cover of celebration to ‘relocate’ Irina Luminesk.”

“Will nobody give me a break?” Gergiev muttered, glaring down at a letter on his desk. “I also received a demand from the Chief. He said it concerns his... rocket development. He’s crafty, I’ll give him that.”

“He wants money?”

“No,” Gergiev replied, swallowing the whirl of his emotions with the rest of his zhizni. “Regardless, tomorrow will go down in human history...and the history of our planet.”

In a dim meeting room at the Delivery Crew headquarters, a group of men huddled around a map of the Military Institute of Medical Science. They were dressed entirely in black, with secret police badges pinned to their chests.

“We expect the main street and alleyways to be full of people,” said the cold voice leading the discussion.

“No using cars, then.”

“We’ll have to do it on-site.”

The men nodded quietly.

“The target is the test subject Irina Luminesk. Execute the plan at 1500 hours.”

Chapter 8: To a New World

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

APRIL 14, 1400 HOURS. A large passenger plane soared over the marshlands through skies full of a light spring haze. The aircraft was destined for the airport closest to Sangrad.

Lev was inside the charter plane, dressed in formal wear. He was busy memorizing the event schedule and his speech, which was largely written by Lyudmila. She sat by his side and, as always, had snacks on hand to pick at.

“Do you ever stop eating?”

Lyudmila smiled at his question. “Well, you never know when we might end up in an emergency, right? And shouldn’t you focus more on your speech than my eating habits?”

“I memorized it.”

Lev felt himself getting brainwashed every time he read the speech. An uncomfortable sensation gnawed the pit of his stomach whenever he imagined speaking the words in front of a crowd.

As the plane neared Sangrad, seven fighter jets moved in to escort them in formation, giving Lev a true hero’s welcome. Outside the window, Lev could see people crammed into the airport grounds, eagerly awaiting the arrival of their national hero. A banner hanging across the airport building read, “CONQUEROR OF SPACE: COMRADE LEV LEPS OF THE ZIRNITRA UNION.”

Sweat dotted Lev’s forehead. This welcome was way over the top. He muttered, “This is crazy...”

Lyudmila remained perfectly calm, clearly used to pompous formalities. “Wait

until you see the city. Maybe we can catch a good glimpse of it now.”

The plane circled the air above Sangrad, and what Lev saw took his breath away. Every building flew the flag of the black dragon. People packed the streets and square, hoisting paintings of Lev and signboards into the air. They flowed into the Grand City Square like blood pulsing through the city’s veins.

“Whoa...” The sight sent a shiver down Lev’s spine.

Lyudmila slapped his knee. “They’re all here for you, so don’t let them down, okay? None of this staring blankly into space, you hear me? Oh, and your shoe is untied.”

Lev tried to do up his shoes with trembling fingers, but they kept untying all over again. At around 2:37 p.m., his plane landed at the airport, bathed in the warm light of the afternoon sun. Shouts and screams from the waiting crowd filled the air.

“He’s here!”

“It’s Comrade Lev!”

Their plane coasted down the runway, stopping right next to a red carpet prepared especially for this occasion. The carpet led into the airport, and crowds on either side clamored for a closer look. Security struggled to hold them back, as if trying to stop a human avalanche.

Lev stepped out the plane’s door with a stiff expression. The people broke into applause and shouted his name, all roaring like thunder. They cried with enthusiasm, their emotions overflowing as tears. TV camera crews scrambled to get good footage, and journalists scribbled in their notebooks.

Another shiver ran through Lev. He was even more nervous now than he had been for the actual spaceflight.

He took a deep breath. “Okay, let’s do this.”

With that, he walked down the stairs and across the red carpet. Seventy meters ahead was a platform, the stage for his flight report. Fresh flowers decorated the stage, and in its center stood Gergiev, looking especially dignified in his formal attire. Around him, the nation’s highest-ranked staff all stood in

neat rows. They included central committee members, top government officials, and a stoic-looking Lt. Gen. Viktor.

A man and woman stood in the corner, looking terribly out of place in their shabby work clothes. They were Lev's parents. At a glance, Lev guessed that their choice of dress was planned. Keeping his parents in their usual clothes was likely an order intended to help the moment better connect with the citizens of the nation. Lev's father stood as still as a statue, while his mother dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. It had been a whole year since he last saw them, and they looked thinner.

Lev looked for Korovin, but he was not among those onstage. Instead, he stood in a corner of the crowd. Seeing him subjected to such treatment made Lev bitter and sad. But Korovin himself looked elated, as if he were seeing his own son there on the red carpet. Their eyes locked for a moment.

"Victory!" cried Korovin, grinning as he waved his cap.

Lev felt a pang in his heart at the man's sheer modesty, but he bit his lip and held the feeling down.

The military brass band began a triumphant rendition of the national air force march. Lev took a nervous first step, but he found it easier as his legs began to move. He walked along the carpet in time with the music. Around him, the crowd whooped and cheered, so passionate and enthusiastic that he broke out in a sweat. He continued down the carpet and neared the stage. As he walked, he passed foot soldiers armed with guns.

Once he reached the stage, Lev stood at attention before Gergiev, and Gergiev stood straight in return. This was the first time Lev had seen the nation's leader in person. For a moment, he felt like the man's palpable, overflowing confidence was about to swallow him.

Then the music stopped. There was no going back now. With this report, Lev's official duties as history's first cosmonaut would begin.

Lev saluted Gergiev. Projecting his voice loud and clear, he said, "First Secretary of the Zirnitra Union, Comrade Gergiev, sir! It is my great honor to report to you here my completion of humanity's first-ever spaceflight!"

Irina's face floated into his mind at the words "first ever." His heart throbbed painfully, but he pressed on.

"It will be my honor to continue my duties, whatever they are, for you and for the sake of our motherland! That concludes the report of Cosmonaut Major Lev Leps!"

He stood back at attention as the crowd erupted into applause and whistles.

Gergiev beamed as he wrapped Lev in a hug, then kissed him on both cheeks. "Congratulations!"

The military brass band began to play the national anthem, and the collective voice of the crowd wrapped around Lev. As their singing swelled powerfully, his chest tightened. The song was like a weight sinking him from the ears, pulling him toward the ground. He wanted to get away from it so badly, he would have chosen the noise bath over it.

However, none of those conflicting emotions reached the surface. Lev put on his smile, shook hands with VIPs, and played his role.

"Now, Lev. Your parents are waiting for you." Gergiev took Lev's hand and led him to his mother and father, then bowed to them in deep reverence. "You have my heartfelt gratitude for raising a true hero of our nation."

Lev's parents, entirely flustered, bowed back. Then his mother broke into tears, clutching Lev's face as she spoke in a trembling voice. "Lev, you never said... We never knew..."

"I'm sorry, Mother..." Lev almost cried right there himself, but he knew he couldn't let such an expression cross the face of a hero.

His father, holding his emotions deep within himself, took an old piece of paper from his shirt and showed it to Lev. "Do you remember this?" he asked.

"Hm?"

It was a child's drawing, done in colored pencil. Lev stood with his family on the surface of the moon, a monstrous winged vampire dead in a crater nearby.

"You drew this when you were five. It's your trip to the moon."

"I...I drew this?"

He remembered then the fear he'd felt at hearing legends of vampires living on the moon. But now...

"Let's save the talk of old times for later," said Gergiev. "For now, we must take a photograph! Let us commemorate this moment!"

Gergiev called the VIPs over. Lev felt trapped as he stood between distinguished political figures, facing the camera. The photographer told him he looked stiff, but Lev laughed it off, saying that he was just nervous. He put on this fake smile so often now that he wondered if he could ever go back to the face he once knew.

With Lev's official report finished, the victory parade into Sangrad began. Lev walked with his parents to the parking area in front of the airport, and the crowd followed them, still clamoring and yelling his name. He'd never seen his parents so nervous as they awkwardly waved at the passionate spectators.

This was nothing compared to what awaited them in Sangrad. When Lev imagined the commotion and throngs of people, he let out a deep sigh. He wasn't even aware he'd done it until his mother, her face still damp from crying, leaned over and whispered in his ear.

"Did something happen?"

"Hm?"

"You look so sad, Lev."

Lev couldn't bring himself to tell her it was Irina, so he lied. "This schedule they've got me on is incredibly tiring."

His father wrapped an arm around him, pulling him in so their cheeks touched. There was a hint of zhizni on the man's breath, and his face was coarse with stubble.

"Are you hiding something, son?"

"No, really, it's nothing."

Lev's father chuckled with a hint of sadness at his son's cold, blunt response. "Aha. So, it's the nation, is it? Well, if you can't speak, you don't have to."

Lev wanted to tell them how happy he was to be a cosmonaut, but he couldn't. Was this what Korovin had meant when he talked about being "prepared"? Lev waved his father off with another fake smile, but the man leaned in and spoke into his ear.

"Your mother and I," he said in a low voice, "were born forty-five years ago, the year our nation was founded. We've been through oppression and war, and we've lost friends and family to them. We've seen people treated in some of the worst ways. We've seen lies become truth, and truth become lies. We've seen inconvenient creases ironed out. That's how our...*magnificent* nation was built."

Those words echoed Lev's experiences too. It pained him to remember them.

His father looked out at the crowd. "Why do you think these people look at you with such hope?" he asked.

"Hope?"

Because I'm a cosmonaut?

Lev was about to speak the thought when his father slapped his back. "If you ask me, by flying all the way into space, you showed them that you're not chained to this nation."

"Father..."

"You go and you live in the new world. Show them all that they can too."

In that moment, looking into the indigo eyes he'd inherited from his father, Lev felt like he'd been entrusted with the future.

When he reached the parking lot, he parted from his parents and was ushered into a car with Gergiev. The vehicle was a long convertible decorated with gorgeous roses.

"Come on! Let's do this!"

Boisterous and excited, Gergiev parroted the very words Lev had spoken at the moment of his launch. Fireworks fired into the sky as the car followed a motorcade of motorcycles. The parade of fifty vehicles rumbled along slowly,

heading for the city square some five kilometers away. Helicopters dropped flyers from above, and the brass band blared the air force anthem. People waved flags by the side of the road and even gathered on nearby rooftops.

“Glory to our space hero!” they shouted. “Glory to Lev Leps!”

Lev and Gergiev waved with both hands in response to the calls of the people. As the line of cars finally neared the city square, they passed in front of the Military Institute of Medical Science. People clustered together in large groups, and patients crowded the windows of the building. Lev found himself searching for Irina among them. He felt it should be her in this car, not him, yet she was nowhere to be seen.

The words Lyudmila had spoken just yesterday passed through his mind. *She’s dead.*

His head swirled with anxiety, and for a moment, all the sound around him cut out. Melancholy draped across his face. When Gergiev noticed Lev’s hand falter mid-wave, he gave Lev a gentle kick.

“Overwhelmed by the crowds?” he asked. The smile on his face belied the cold look in his eyes.

“My apologies,” Lev said.

He put his smiling mask back on, his cheeks twitching as he did so.

At 3:15 p.m., the parade finally arrived at the Neglin, an ocean of people surrounding it. The Neglin’s walls were decorated with all the state emblems that comprised the Zirnitra Union; Irina’s hometown of Lilitto occupied a tiny space in the corner.

“Finally! Here we are!”

Lev followed Gergiev out of the car as their security detail ran toward them. Guards lined the path to the city square, and iron fences on either side strained under the pressure of the crowds. As news spread that Lev had arrived, the mob erupted into shouts and cries, transforming into an amorphous mass of noise. Lev took a deep breath. Here he was, just moments away from facing the

two hundred thousand people who wanted to see and hear him.

“Comrade Lev Leps! This way!”

Gergiev marched onward, and Lev trailed behind, waving to the crowd. Voices flew at him, powerful with passion. The moment he set foot in the city square, they burst into cheers.

“Lev Leps! Lev Leps! Lev Leps!”

The hair on Lev’s arms stood on end at the storm of praise and admiration. It was the sound of two hundred thousand pairs of feet stomping in excitement, shaking the earth with their passionate enthusiasm. The air was thick with the unusual electricity of the crowd, and Lev found it difficult to breathe. He was completely and utterly lost for words.

As he made his way toward the mausoleum, shaken by this terrifying welcome, Lev noticed a few familiar faces in the front row: Mikhail, Roza, and the rest of the Mechta Shest. They were attending as ordinary soldiers, and they waved at him along with the crowd. Lev wanted to go shake their hands, but he couldn’t afford to give away their identities, so he simply waved back and passed them.

He walked by the special seating area next to the mausoleum and up the twelve-meter staircase that led to the speaker’s platform. Members of the central committee, politicians, and other VIPs crowded the stage, all dressed in formal wear with medals shining on their chests. He and Gergiev stood among them.

Lev looked across the city square at the sea of spectators—at all two hundred thousand pairs of eyes. His knees quivered. Not even in his wildest dreams had he ever imagined anything like this, and he gazed upon the crowd as he waved, overwhelmed.

Huge images of Lev hung from the walls of the department store opposite the square. They made him dizzy. When he spotted the Military Institute of Medical Science behind the store, memories of Irina’s return and celebration assailed him. They’d done little more than gather in the employee cafeteria and share a meal—just Irina, Lev, and a handful of important staff. It hadn’t even been a celebration for Irina but of the Nosferatu Project’s success and their own

efforts.

How can you even compare the two?

As Lev reflected on those old memories, a leading member of the central committee announced the official start of the ceremony.

“We will now begin the victory celebration for Comrade Lev Leps, history’s first cosmonaut!” he shouted. Cries and applause almost drowned out his voice entirely. “And now, a few words from the Zirnitra Union’s hero himself!”

The crowd exploded like a volcano of excitement.

“Lev! Lev! Lev!”

Lev rose to his feet, dazed by the sheer power of the crowd. He couldn’t help feeling like it was Irina’s name they should call, but not one person did, because she wasn’t human. She was a national secret, a test subject that flew through space and was treated no better than Maly the dog.

The cameras broadcasting the live event locked on to Lev. Gergiev motioned with his jaw for Lev to give his speech. There was no escape. He had to do it.

“Lev! Lev! Lev!”

“Why do you think these people look at you with such hope?”

No, he told himself. No matter who they look at and why, I can only play my role. I am history’s first cosmonaut, the hero Lev Leps.

Resigning himself to that decision, Lev stood before the microphone. Here he was, about to speak to a crowd of two hundred thousand. Two hundred million people around the country awaited his voice. Three billion people across the world. He was about to address everyone, to commemorate a historical first, an event that had never come before and would never come again.

Lev raised his hands to quiet the crowd. He took a deep breath, filled his body with energy, and began his speech praising the Zirnitra Union.

“My beloved comrades! My countrymen! Fyodor Gergiev, and our admirable leaders!”

The crowd hushed and held its breath, waiting for Lev’s next words.

“I am but an ordinary human who was assigned the great honor and duty of humanity’s first spaceflight. For that responsibility, for that chance, I am eternally grateful!”

Cheers broke out again, and the people seated by the mausoleum offered satisfied applause.

Lev’s heart felt empty as he went on. “To the scientists, engineers, and laborers who built the spaceship—I never once doubted that we would succeed in our mission!”

He desperately wanted to say Korovin’s name, but he couldn’t.

“To Cosmonaut #2 and Cosmonaut #3, and all the people who shed blood, sweat, and tears to prepare alongside me—I believe, without a doubt, that you too will fly to space as I have!”

How did Mikhail and Roza feel about being referred to as numbers? For now, they were no more than ordinary soldiers, so he couldn’t even look at them as he spoke. Nonetheless, Lev pushed on with Lyudmila’s speech.

“To Fyodor Gergiev! You were the first one there for me mere moments after launch, the first to congratulate me, and the first to embrace me to celebrate my safe return home!”

Gergiev’s smile was as bright as a sunflower, and he nodded with great satisfaction.

It was all a lie, yet this was the hero the nation wanted. They didn’t want Lev’s emotions getting in the way. Everything was for the motherland. He went on reading praise for the Supreme Leader and admiration for the nation. The crowd whooped and hollered, applauding every word. In Lev’s heart, however, he felt sick. He couldn’t say a single word to the people he was truly grateful for. Irina, the person most deserving of praise, wasn’t even here.

Lev held it all down. His fingernails dug into his palms as his hands balled into fists.

“I am certain that the spaceships of our motherland will fly ever farther into space!”

He glanced at the Military Institute of Medical Science.

If Irina can hear this... If she can hear the words I'm saying... How do they make her feel?

Surely she'd be enraged or stunned into silence. But Lev's mouth went on moving, spitting out the speech he had taken time to memorize.

"To all of you who supported me through this, from the bottom of my heart, thank you!"

A tongue of honey—so sweet it made Lev want to vomit. The wind ruffled the picture of him hanging from the department store; its face distorted before his eyes. It was as if the image were laughing at him.

Who even are you? it seemed to say.

But he was so close to finishing his speech. There were only three lines left.

Glory to the Zirnitra Union!

Glory to the citizens of our marvelous republic!

And glory to the central committee and its leader, Fyodor Gergiev!

If he could just finish, his speech would be over, and Gergiev would speak next. The cosmonaut Lev Leps would be recognized worldwide for his feat, and the darkness of history would bury the work of Irina Luminesk.

Can I let that happen?

Lev had made it this far, but now the thought troubled him once more. Could he use Irina as a stepping-stone to space? Use her words as his own? Call himself history's first and let her fade into the darkness?

Could he forgive himself?

He was troubled and lost, and he felt desperation in his voice as he shouted.

"Glory to the Zirnitra Union!"

He would live this lie for the rest of his life, pretending to be history's first cosmonaut.

Can I really let that happen?

“Glory to the citizens of our marvelous republic!”

It's all over with just one more line. But do I really want to let this happen?

“And...!”

I'll be killing her. She'll die, and nobody will ever know who she was.

“And...!”

The words caught in Lev's throat. He dropped into silence. His mouth closed, and murmurs rippled through the audience when they felt a change in the air. Gergiev stared at him, searching his face for an answer.

Come now, cosmonaut, his gaze said. Be our hero.

“Ngh!”

Lev looked down, feeling the pressure of two hundred thousand sets of eyes and the Supreme Leader's heavy gaze. Then he noticed the sun shining off something on the ground by his feet.

“Huh?!”

It was a copper coin minted in the year 1943.

“It's the fare...to the moon...” he whispered, kneeling and picking up the coin.

A tremor ran through the crowd. They had no idea what Lev was doing, crouching by the pulpit. Even those around him couldn't get close enough to find out for themselves.

Lev stood and put a fist to his chest, the coin wrapped in his hand. With the eyes of the entire crowd locked on him at the platform, he asked himself a question.

When I wished that Irina would one day make it to the moon, was I lying to myself?

But he knew his feelings had been true. He still remembered December 12—specifically, the moment before launch, when he'd held on to Irina's necklace for safekeeping. He remembered what he said to her.

“...you can take it yourself when you go to the moon.”

He hadn't said it to placate her or cheer her up. He'd said it because he believed it. In that one unguarded moment, he'd known from Irina's face that she truly trusted him. Yet here he was, trying to erase her spaceflight from history. He was betraying the feelings she'd entrusted him with.

Irina.

He wondered if she was there in the hospital, listening to him. His heart reached out to her, searching for her.

You lied to me out of kindness, and because of that, I am a cosmonaut. My lies are horrendous, though. Will I use them to erase you?

"No..."

Lev glared at the posters of himself hanging from the department store—at the smiling cosmonaut.

You have no right to call yourself a hero. No right to call yourself history's first. You're lying to the world to hide the truth.

His fist pushed harder against his chest. What was in his heart? What were his true feelings?

In truth, he didn't need to wonder. He had written them last night as he listened to "The New World." He had torn those words up and thrown them away, considering them terrorism. Speaking them would guarantee that Cosmonaut Lev Leps would soon die in an "accident." In accordance with the nation's rules, he would be disposed of in secret.

But his father's words rang in his head.

"By flying all the way into space, you showed them that you're not chained to this nation," he'd said. *"You go and you live in the new world."*

He was right.

Irina, you risked your life to fly through space. This time, I will risk mine to ensure your name is never forgotten. I came back from space—from the new world—to give our world a message.

Lev placed the coin in his jacket pocket and smiled bashfully. He moved closer to the microphone once more.

“My apologies,” he said. “I finally remembered what I had to say.”

He laughed, and the crowd laughed with him. Nobody had any idea what hid behind that casual grin. But Lyudmila saw the change in Lev and moved quickly to Gergiev, whispering something in his ear. The Supreme Leader’s brow furrowed, and he nodded, as if coming to an important decision.

Lev glanced at Lyudmila. *If you’re going to shoot me live, in front of the whole world, then do your worst.*

Turning back to the crowd, he lifted both arms wide and spoke once more.

“People of my beloved nation. Watchers and listeners around the world. I have one correction to make.” Lev took a breath and then went on in a calm, collected voice. “I am humanity’s first cosmonaut, yes, but I am not *history’s* first cosmonaut.”

A few reporters looked at one another. “Susnin?” they asked.

VIPs shuffled in their seats, frowning.

Come on, let’s do this! Time to fire a bullet of truth into this lie-covered country.

Was it revolution or terrorism? That was for the people of the future to decide.

Lev took another deep breath, and then he shouted loud enough for his words to resound around the world.

“The first to fly through space was not me! It was Irina Luminesk, a seventeen-year-old girl! And she’s not human, she’s a Nosferatu!”

Confused commotion rose in the crowd. Gergiev’s cheek twitched, and he glowered at the flustered leaders behind him, ordering them to calm down with a gesture of his hand. As they glared daggers at Lev, like they wanted to murder him where he stood, Lyudmila shot them a look that said she had things under control. The vice-president of the Delivery Crew could not make a move in front of three billion people, so he sat clenching his teeth.

Feeling the hate and helplessness behind his back told Lev he had made the right move. If they interrupted his speech here, it would only cause an uproar.

He could not be stopped. They could not kill him here, no matter what he said.

Lev raised his voice and went on even more fervently. “Irina Luminesk flew into space to confirm the safety of our rockets and the potential dangers of zero gravity! Thanks to her, I was able to make my own flight safely! I stand here before you because of Irina Luminesk! I wish she could be here, but she’s weak to sunlight. I imagine she’s hiding somewhere.”

The crowd was stunned. Lev looked out at all the people and went on.

“On that note, do you hate vampires? Do you despise the so-called cursed species? To be honest, I too feared the Nosferatu! The stories my parents told me scared me so bad, I wet the bed more times than I can count! So, when I first met Irina Luminesk, I shook with terror! I thought she would bite me and kill me! But I was a fool! Everything we’ve been told about them is a lie!”

Lev thrust his fist into the air.

“Irina Luminesk is no different from my friends or family! She’s the same as you and me—she looked up at the stars, and she dreamed of space! She’s just an adorable young lady! She likes lemon seltzer, she gets drunk off a single sip of zhizni, and she makes a delicious aspic! She conquered her fear of heights, she enjoys jazz and ice skating, and you should have heard her the first time she ever watched a movie! Irina Luminesk lives here on our planet, with me, with you—she’s one of us!”

There was so much to love about Irina, so little to hate. He wanted them all to know about her, to recognize the existence of the girl who’d lost her parents, survived on her own, and risked her life to fly to the stars.

“To the people of my beloved nation, to watchers and listeners around the world! I beg you! Please, celebrate Irina Luminesk’s success! And remember that she is my comrade!” Lev looked at the sky and saluted. “Thank you for listening! Here ends the speech of the *second* cosmonaut, Lev Leps!”

Silent bewilderment reigned over all. There was not a single cry of celebration nor one handclap of applause. For the two hundred thousand people gathered in the city square, Lev’s words were perhaps not the honey they’d hoped for but poison instead.

Still, if his message got through to even one person out there in the world, Lev would be satisfied. He felt as though his duty as a cosmonaut was finally over. He let his hand fall to his side and stepped back from the platform.

At that moment, he heard a pair of quiet claps from the special viewing area by the stage. Lev whirled around to see the source—his parents.

“Father... Mother...”

Applause began to spread through the crowd in the square. Mikhail, Roza, and all his comrades who wanted to see space as badly as he did raised their hands up to the sky and clapped.

“Guys...” Emotion swelled in Lev’s chest, bringing him close to tears.

“Lev!”

When he heard the voice call him, he knew it immediately. Shocked, he turned and saw a girl step out from the shadow of a model rocket, shoving her way through the crowd. Around her neck, a blue stone glittered in the light.

“Irina?!”

At the sound of Lev blurting her name, the people around Irina erupted into cries of surprise.

Scarlet Eyes

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“**L**EV!” Irina ran toward the fence, jostling other onlookers. “Get out of my way!”

After escaping the hospital with Anya’s help, the vampire girl had safely slipped unnoticed into the crowd. During Lev’s speech praising the nation, heartache and despair had overwhelmed her. But then, the end of his speech suddenly whisked her deep anguish away.

Lev had called himself the *second* cosmonaut, and he'd shared the truth. From what she saw of the reaction onstage, the revelation was completely unexpected. Lev hadn't been allowed to share his knowledge of the Nosferatu project publicly; it was strictly confidential. Yet he faced the whole world as his audience and told them, "I beg you! Please, celebrate Irina Luminesk's success!"

Irina knew she should hide, but she was propelled forward. She pushed through the crowd, sweating in the heat of the sun. With all the energy her body had left, she cried out in a voice that seemed crackly and dry.

"Lev!"

She wanted to be with him. She ran with only that in mind. As she put her hands on the fence to climb over, a security guard darted over to her.

"Stop!"

As she tried to wrest free of the guard, he grabbed her jacket hem.

"Let me go!"

Irina shrugged out of the jacket, but that didn't stop the guard. People nearby backed away and eyed her with suspicion. Her back was against the fence now. She had nowhere left to run.

"Rina!"

Anya exploded out of the crowd and slammed into the security guard, who flipped through the air and collapsed onto the ground.

"Anya?!"

Lying on the ground, Anya pointed at the mausoleum. "Go!"

"Thank you!"

Irina leaped over the fence, landing on the path to the mausoleum. She took off, her eyes fixed on Lev. A nearby guard tried to stop her, but she twisted out of reach, her knees scraping the ground as she deftly moved out of the way.

You'll never catch me. Not until I get to Lev!

Her black hair waved in the wind, revealing the pointy ears underneath. Blood dripped from her knee. The crowd watched her with a mixture of fear, curiosity,

and contempt. She felt all of it but continued her mad dash, not giving the crowd a second glance. It was the fastest she'd run since the day she raced against Lev.

The abruptness of it all flustered the security guards. Irina slipped past them before they could stop her and kept running. Her dress stuck to her body, her skin sweaty and red, burning as it itched under the sunlight. Still, she refused to take her eyes off Lev. She felt the things she wanted to say to him surge through her body.

"Lev!"

At last, she reached the mausoleum and ran up the platform steps, exhausted.

"Irina!"

Lev ran down from the platform, and they met at the landing near the middle of the stairs.

Irina's shoulders heaved with each breath. Now that Lev was in front of her, she didn't know what to say. There was too much in her head. The crowd's growing uproar wrapped around her, weighing her down. From the platform, Gergiev looked at them, his face as blank as a statue's.

"Lev, I..." Irina faltered, unable to find the words. She looked at Lev with tears in her eyes.

He smiled at her. "First things first. Let's introduce you to everyone."

Lev found a security guard with a loudspeaker and swiped it from his hands.

"I'll give it back!" he said, putting the loudspeaker to his lips and addressing the crowd. "This is Irina Luminesk! She's history's first cosmonaut!"

There was a sprinkling of applause throughout the crowd, but most people were confused and unsure how to react. They looked at each other, puzzled. Irina wasn't certain what to do either. Her eyes darted around, and her face went red.

"Go on, Irina. Say hello," Lev told her.

"Uh..."

“You’re a cosmonaut. You have to say a few words.”

Continuing to smile, Lev put the loudspeaker in Irina’s hands. She was still unsure what to say, standing there looking out at two hundred thousand people, all their eyes on her.

“Er...”

Her heart thrummed like it would leap from her throat, and her breath hitched. As fear crept up on her, her teeth chattered and a shudder ran through her body.

What am I supposed to do?

She felt frozen solid. Lev put a gentle hand on her back.

“Be proud of yourself,” he said. “What you accomplished was amazing. Something to take pride in.”

“I... Okay.”

“If anyone tries anything, I’ll be right here to protect you.”

He patted her back, and she felt the message that came with it. *Don’t be afraid. You didn’t do anything wrong.*

Irina was here now, so she had to speak. She gathered her courage and looked out at the crowd again, waiting for jeers and boos. However, although there was still a bit of fuss, everyone simply looked at her with curiosity and uncertainty.

Knowing she had to say something, Irina brought the loudspeaker to her lips.

“I am Irina Luminesk,” she said timidly, cold sweat on her forehead and back. Her mind felt completely blank. “The Earth, from space... It’s so, so beautiful, and...”

Her thoughts wouldn’t settle, and that made her tongue-tied.

“I always wanted to go to space.” Her voice quivered, and she felt tears well up from the bottom of her heart. “I wanted to go before any human got there... That’s what I thought. That’s how I lived... But I...”

Before she could finish, a heckling voice fired out of the crowd.

“Die, you damned vampire!”

Irina froze, her heart shrinking. She looked down at her feet as fear gripped her once more, but Lev put a reassuring hand on her back.

“When you saw the moon, you felt something, right?” he prompted.

“Huh?”

“You wanted to say something when we were in that snowstorm. You know, after you came back. Tell them what you felt.”

She had wanted to tell Lev about a new dream. Having hated humans for so long, it was hard to believe the dream was hers. And now, she was about to share it with the whole world.

Irina looked up at the crowd slowly and timidly, and she remembered. She remembered standing next to Lev, just like this, surrounded by humans.

“I’m Irina Luminesk. I hate humans. Don’t talk to me. That’s all.”

Even then, after she’d said such a horrible thing to people she didn’t even know, he’d continued to protect her. He was doing the same thing now, standing by her side. That thought conquered the fear in her heart.

“I can do it, Lev...”

Irina raised her head and looked out at the crowd through her scarlet irises. She felt the two hundred thousand sets of eyes on her little body. But she stood her ground through her trembling feet, gripping the loudspeaker in shaky hands.



When she spoke, she no longer felt she needed to hide her fangs.

“For the longest time, I hated humans. I despised you. I was also deathly afraid of heights, and that left me in tears. But still, I became a cosmonaut, and I did so because of Lev, the man standing here next to me! He helped me make my dream come true! And now, I have a new dream!”

That dream was impossible. The crowd might even turn on her. All the same, she would tell them. She wanted the whole world to know. She took a deep breath, then shouted with power she hoped might reach the stars themselves.

“I want to go to the moon with Lev!”

She wiped tears from the corners of her eyes with a fist and clamped her mouth tight.

Cosmonauts don't cry, she told herself. Even if they execute me after this, I won't cry!

With that, Irina made up her mind. She would be strong and live life her way, right until the end.

“Thank you for listening! I am the Lilitto Republic cosmonaut, Irina Luminesk!”

The crowd, which had listened in stunned silence, broke into an unsteady ruckus. The scattered applause sounded like drops of rain, but quiet spread like waves in the confusion. At the same time, a figure silently walked to Lev and Irina, both basking in the glow of having finally said what weighed on their hearts. Irina felt a sudden rush of fear and turned to see Lyudmila, whose expression was like cold steel.

Lev's face suddenly tensed. “Oh,” he muttered.

Irina was seeing Lyudmila for the first time, but the deep green of the woman's eyes and the darkness hidden behind them froze the vampire girl in a cold sweat. She found herself on guard, her instincts telling her that Lyudmila was dangerous.

Lyudmila stopped in front of the two. Without so much as a blink, she gave a slow, reverent salute. Then she spoke, her voice cold and dispassionate.

“Go back to the speaker's platform. The celebration will finish without issue.”

Lev returned Lyudmila's salute and nodded. With his eyes, he told Irina to follow the order. Powerless to do anything else, Irina also saluted.

Black Dragon's Eyes

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IN THE CENTER of the platform, Gergiev stood straight and dignified. With one cocked eyebrow, he allowed a hint of a smile to rise to his features as Lyudmila brought Lev and Irina back to the platform.

Then...

Crack!

He brought his hands together in front of his chest in a big handclap.

"Wonderful!"

At the sight of their own Supreme Leader applauding Lev and Irina, the nation's political leaders and the crowd began to follow suit, their faces portraits of shock and confusion. Lev and Irina's expressions were no different; they looked utterly perplexed as they bowed politely. Only Lyudmila wore a bright smile as she clapped.

As the city square came together as one, Gergiev moved to the microphone. He removed his cap and raised both hands to quiet the crowd. When the venue fell silent, he spoke with great power in his voice.

"My most beloved friends and comrades! People of the world!" He gestured at the crowd, scanning their faces, and took a breath. So strong was his aura that, in just a few seconds, he had every spectator wrapped around his finger. "It is with great pleasure that I ask us all to show our gratitude for the *heroes* of the Union and their tremendous achievements. I give you Lev Leps and Irina Luminesk!"

Gergiev motioned to the crowd for their applause, and they gave it to him, completely at his beck and call. He turned to Lev and Irina with great passion in

his eyes.

“Irina Luminesk! Your desire to contribute to your nation’s scientific development saw you volunteer for and become the pilot for our test flights! Lev Leps! You were there alongside her, training her to make sure she was ready for the unknown. Your successful launches are truly the crystallization of our dreams!”

“Huh?” Lev and Irina muttered simultaneously, but Gergiev’s silver-tongued speech washed away the sound of their voices.

“To our comrades across the world, I must apologize! The spread of misinformation concerning the ‘cosmonaut’ Susnin delayed our announcement of Irina Luminesk’s achievements. We deliberated right up until the very start of this celebratory event, but there was much confusion on-site, this being our fine nation’s first-ever live broadcast. We have done our cosmonauts a disservice, and I stand before you—our comrades here and across the world—to beg your forgiveness for the error!”

With that, Gergiev bowed deeply. He spoke his brazen lie with natural confidence, justifying and smoothing over the commotion. With their own Supreme Leader apologizing before them, the crowd began to applaud emphatically, raising their voices in support.

“Glory to the Union!”

“Glory to Comrade Gergiev!”

A grin spread across Gergiev’s face, his head still lowered. “Oh, you fools...” he whispered, the words blooming into a bold, wicked smile.

It was as if everything that happened had been exactly as he’d hoped.

“Now...is the time for revolution.”

Bathing in the cheers and claps of the two hundred thousand spectators, Gergiev slowly raised his head, like a sunflower opening toward the rays of the sun.

“Comrades! I thank you!” he boomed, his speech still not finished. “Behind the delay regarding the announcement of Irina Luminesk’s success is a group

that still clings to prehistoric beliefs! This group, which looked to interfere in that announcement, even called for Irina Luminesk's execution, dubbing her part of a 'cursed species'! Do we really want those closest to us, our neighbors, to be so easily erased?! I, for one, think not!"

At this subtle criticism of the Delivery Crew, the crowd was somewhat apprehensive, but they still gave another round of thunderous applause.

Gergiev raised both hands into the air and spoke louder. "The efforts of the Union have ushered the world into a new space age! We will throw away outdated beliefs about so-called cursed species! We will offer love and friendship to our fellow people—human, vampire, and beyond! What can you call a country that refuses to do so but 'underdeveloped'? What else can you call a country that discriminates under the banner of free states? That exploits and makes slaves of its people?!"

Gergiev's words regarding the activism of the United Kingdom's dhampirs were like a knife twisting into the other country.

"My beloved comrades!" Gergiev went on, nearing his conclusion. "We are an advanced, peaceful nation where all workers and races are entitled to the same happiness. Even those born in poor farming villages, and those despised as vampires—we all have the right to dream!"

A tongue of honey, a heart of gall.

Gergiev, the Supreme Leader of the Zirnitra Union, was the very embodiment of those words.

"With this success, the Union's space development is far from over! The exploration of the Mechta space vessels continues! In the very near future, we will land on the moon!"

Coda:

ПОСТЛЮДИЯ

Indigo Eyes

• ОЧИ ИНДИГО •

THOUGH THE CELEBRATORY FESTIVAL had gone slightly off the rails, Gergiev and the Minister of Foreign Affairs told reporters worldwide that everything went according to schedule and that the speeches had proceeded as directed.

Lev and Irina lingered in the city square for hours, waving at the people who flooded in to see them. The citizens looked up at Irina under the shade of her umbrella with more curiosity than fear or hatred. This girl who they couldn't quite believe was a cosmonaut, let alone a vampire, entranced and intrigued them. Irina was clearly embarrassed, unaccustomed to being looked at in such a way.

As the sun set, the crowds began to disperse, and Lev and Irina found themselves surrounded by security guards. They were then taken straight to the grand palace of the Neglin, away from prying eyes, without even a moment to get changed.

On the top floor of the grand palace was a lavish meeting room. Lev and Irina sat opposite Lyudmila, a beautiful marble table between them. Gorgeous chandeliers glittered above the table. The security guards had been sent outside, so the three were entirely alone. There was tea and strawberry varenje in front of each of them, but Lyudmila made no move to reach for either.

“Well, the two of you are indeed a handful. But your little gamble was a tremendous success, Lev. If anyone tries to destroy either of you, the world will riot. I can see the headlines now. *‘Young Cosmonauts Erased for Revealing*

National Secrets.”

Lyudmila laughed. Her tone was light and jovial. She didn’t chastise Lev at all for abandoning the celebration’s detailed schedule—in fact, she seemed to like it. Still, Lev’s heart refused to settle. It was far too strange to him that Gergiev had been so quick to accept Irina.

“Comrade Gergiev’s speech made it sound like he knew what I was going to do all along,” he said.

“Because he did,” Lyudmila replied, eating her varenye.

“Huh?”

“I saw it in one of your draft speeches. You tried to erase it, but I could still read the words Irina Luminesk.”

Lev couldn’t believe his ears.

Lyudmila sipped her bitter tea and went on. “I thought about intimidating you again, but then you might’ve scrapped the speech and only said the truth. So, I prepared two speeches for Comrade Gergiev. We decided that, if you played the role of the good little hero and didn’t mention Lycoris, we’d go with Plan Lozh. And, if you blew the whistle on the Nosferatu Project, we’d go with Plan Istina.”

The two plans were codenamed “lie” and “truth,” respectively.

Lyudmila then revealed how they’d acted on Plan Istina. When Lev began exposing the truth, even Gergiev was initially flustered. But when Lyudmila reminded the Supreme Leader that it was all within the realm of expected risk, and slipped him a note reminding him of Plan Istina, he sat back and waited for Irina’s speech to end.

Though many Union citizens hated vampires, the populace was far more terrified of purges, waves and waves of which they’d watched under the former government. They also wanted to see the Union best the United Kingdom. Since the speech put the citizens’ fears on one side, and Irina—as well as their hopes—on the other, it was all too clear which the people would choose. Gergiev understood that there was some risk in showing support for the Nosferatu, but it was also a chance to position himself as a revolutionary and a hero.

Lev's and Irina's mouths hung open in shock as Lyudmila put a speech in front of them.

"This was the speech for Plan Lozh, which we didn't use," she said.

It focused on praising Lev and on pride for the nation. Not a word touched on the topic of Irina, and there was no criticism of the Delivery Crew or United Kingdom.

Lev ground his teeth at the unveiling of the truth. He felt like he'd been used. Irina sat in silence, a frown on her face.

Lyudmila turned to Irina, appraising her. "Aren't you glad Lev did what he did? If he hadn't, you'd be in the hospital right now. They would have slipped you poison and cut off your head with whatever was at hand." Irina glared at her, but Lyudmila was unperturbed. "I must admit, we didn't expect you to escape the hospital and get all the way to the stage. But it did make for a much more exciting show, *and* you escaped the Delivery Crew."

Lyudmila's tinkling laughter grated on Irina's ears. "Anya had better be safe!" she growled.

"Relax. She'll return to the air force biomedical laboratory to work under Mozhaysky again. We're not like the old-fashioned regime, purging and erasing anyone and everyone with a rebellious streak; we value our skilled individuals."

Despite her words, Lyudmila was once again talking about people as objects—tools to be used.

"Oh, that reminds me," she continued. "Did you hear that Comrade Gergiev was threatened by none other than the Chief?"

Lev's eyes opened wide. "The Chief threatened him...?"

"He put it in a letter. 'If you kill Irina Luminesk, you kill my life's work,' he wrote."

Lev's breath caught in his throat. Korovin had told him he'd pressured Gergiev, but Lev never imagined the man would go so far. The top levels of the nation were far more twisted than he had imagined. Irina put a hand to her mouth in shock; Korovin's feelings overwhelmed her.

Lyudmila merely shrugged, seeming entirely disinterested. “Everyone seems to forget the rule about handling the test subject as an object,” she muttered.

According to Lyudmila, Gergiev was actually pleased with Plan Istina’s results. Lev’s decision to reveal Irina to the world allowed him to ignore Korovin’s threat *and* level harsh words at both the previous government and the United Kingdom. Gergiev was happier now than if they’d gone with Plan Lozh.

Still, one particular word rang suspiciously in Lev’s mind.

Pleased with the “results”? Was this what Lyudmila wanted all along?

When he thought back to what had happened the previous night, his suspicions grew.

He posed a question to Lyudmila. “You once told me that you wanted a cosmonaut who was a revolutionary. Someone to lead people into the new world.”

“That I did.”

“Today, was I... Did I do exactly what you wanted?”

“Hm?”

Lev noticed the slightest twitch in Lyudmila’s cheek.

“You knew that I wrote Irina’s name in my draft speech, but you still told me she died. You pointed a gun at me. You pushed me into a corner and made me think that if I did nothing, Irina would simply vanish into the darkness. Then you played that music to heighten those feelings, and you left me on my own.”

Lyudmila chuckled. “Thinking a little too hard, aren’t you? Do you really think I’d be so cruel?” She grinned, her eyes flashing with defiance.

So he was right. Lev’s rage bubbled to the surface. He took the Lozh speech and crushed it in his hand, then slowly rose to his feet. He glared at Lyudmila, who sat with her head resting on her hands.

“I forgot to say one thing in my own speech,” he told her.

“And what’s that?”

“Irina and I—we’re not damned pawns in your game of revolution!”

He slammed the Lozh speech back on the table, the anger in his voice clear.

Lyudmila was taken aback for a brief moment, but then she stood with a bold smile. “Hmph. That’s the spirit. I’d expect nothing less from the one leading us into the new world.”

“Whatever it is you’re scheming, Lev and I are going to the moon,” Irina cut in.

She picked up her tea gracefully and glared at Lyudmila as if the woman were an underling.

“Well, in any case, you’d best be careful.” Lyudmila pointed her finger like a gun at Irina and Lev and mock-fired at them both. “The committee didn’t approve that speech, so more than a few people aren’t happy with how things turned out.”

Lev knew that was no mere threat. He’d felt murderous stares pierce him at the conclusion of his speech. Veins had bulged from the deputy prime minister’s forehead, while the director of the Delivery Crew sent his rage through his cane, knocking it on the platform floor repeatedly. Somewhere out there, Korovin’s archrival, Graudyn, would be utterly seething.

Lyudmila took the Lozh speech from the table and shot Lev and Irina a sharp sidelong glance. “Let’s hope your celebratory dinner this evening doesn’t turn into a last supper.”

With that, she turned on her heel and left. The air seemed to lighten with her gone; Lev and Irina let out sighs of relief. Their synchronous timing caught them by surprise, and they looked at each other.

“It’s been a long time,” Irina said.

“Yeah. I think the last time I saw you was the day before you were sent to the hospital...”

It had been the middle of winter back then, when it was still so very cold. More than the movie and meal they’d shared, Lev recalled his desire to have his blood sucked, and the feelings simmering in his heart as he’d clutched Irina tight in his arms. The memories embarrassed him, and he looked away. Irina might have been thinking the same thing—her face went red, and she glanced

down at her hands.

Lev took his cup of tea and sat diagonally from Irina. He sipped the lukewarm brew and watched her out of the corner of his eye. She was tasting the strawberry varenye with some curiosity, and perhaps because of her metropolitan dress, she struck him as mature.

Irina seemed to feel his gaze on her, and she glanced at him. “So, in your speech, when you talked about me... That wasn’t planned?”

“Nope.”

“Then wouldn’t you have been better off saying nothing? Why did you say all that?”

Lev wasn’t sure how to answer. He hadn’t imagined Irina being the one asking him that question, and he was embarrassed to think back on it. Still, he held himself together and shrugged it off.

“I had a feeling that, if I didn’t say something, you’d bite me.”

“Uh-huh...” Irina’s gaze bored into him.

“Wh-what is it now?”

“Nothing. Just thinking about how far you’ve come since wetting the bed from vampire nightmares.”

“Well, what about you? Where’d you get the idea to just jump out from behind a model rocket like that?”

Lev’s question caught Irina off guard. Her cheeks flushed red, her eyes flicking everywhere but his, and she whipped her face away from him.

“My escape route just *happened* to end where you were giving your speech. But, because of you, I was caught anyway.”

Her snappy, thorny response relieved Lev immensely. That was the Irina he knew best.

“Ah, I see,” he said, putting a hand in his pocket and taking out the 1943 copper coin he’d picked off the platform. “Here, you can have this. Think of it as a good-luck charm to help you get to the moon.”

“Oh, this is the year I was born. What a coincidence.”

Lev knew it was anything but coincidence, but he didn't think it needed explaining. Irina put the coin and her lunny kamen side by side, and her eyes wavered like she was a lost puppy.

“Do you think, um... Do you think I'll...be able to go to space again someday?”

Although Lev yearned to nod and tell her so, he didn't want to give Irina false hope. “Whatever happens after today, your guess is as good as mine. But for a little while, at least, we'll be going on a world tour.”

“Oh...” Irina's face was etched with anxiety.

What would the world think of them? How would people look at history's first cosmonauts? How would they feel about the speeches that rocked the world?

“I want to go to the moon with Lev!”

Irina's voice had moved something in Lev's heart.

“The moon, huh?”

He opened the window and walked onto the balcony. The full moon shone brightly in the middle of the sky. Irina came out with her lunny kamen in one hand and her new coin in the other, standing by his side.

Lev wanted to hear Irina's poem once more—the poem of the moon. “How does it go again?” he asked. “Sinus Iridum...? Is that how it starts?”

Irina nodded. She looked up at the moon, whispering as if to a beloved friend.

“Lacus Somniorum...”

Her fangs, peeking from her mouth, seemed unsuited to her cute lips.

“Palus Somni...”

Irina wove the words of the old poem with great care, one by one.

“Oceanus Procellarum...”

Her dark black hair was carried on the wind, revealing her pointed ears.

“Mare Vaporum...”

Irina held her necklace and copper coin up to the moon. Pure blue light shone

in the clear crystal, and the moonlight reflecting off the coin cast it in a shade of indigo. A shooting star trailed across the sky, as if hanging from the moon. Deep scarlet wrapped Irina's crimson eyes.

"Will we get there someday?" she murmured.

Now a cosmonaut, Irina put her hands together and stared at the moon. She entrusted it with her fleeting prayer, if ever so quietly. A prayer for the two of them.

Lev looked at Irina beside him, her eyes closed, and wondered, *Will the day come when the two of us stand on the moon?* Perhaps that was only a dream as sweet as honey. They could call it a manned spaceflight, but the truth was they'd only made it as high as a hundred kilometers. The moon was more than thirty-eight hundred thousand kilometers away.

Even assuming they could get there, could they make it back to Earth? Was the world of the moon just the stuff of science fiction movies?

No. They had already achieved what was once thought impossible. Korovin, the Mechta Shest, Irina—they all dreamed of space. There was nothing to fear. All they had to do was keep following the path of the stars into the new age.

Now a cosmonaut, Lev looked at the moon floating brilliantly in the sky above. His indigo eyes shone along with it.

"We'll get there, Irina. I promise."



Second Movement: The Silver-Haired Vampire

APRIL 18, 1961. The United Kingdom of Arnack. The sun shone over vast cotton fields surrounded by hills. Bart Fifield chowed down on his hamburger lunch alongside his coworkers. He was a new arrival, having only started at ANSA this month. Since Bart was still training, they hadn't yet decided which department he'd be working in.

Bart had arrived just in time for what was called the Leps-Luminesk Shock, which had sent the UK into an uproar. Not only was the United Kingdom beaten to a manned space launch, it was also labeled "outdated" and "undeveloped." That was yet another humiliation on top of the Parusnyř Shock, and it stained the UK's dignity as one of the great world powers.

The Hermes Seven had scheduled their own manned space launch for May. Bart's brother, Aaron, was supposed to be the first person *and* first UK citizen in space. Now the Zirnitra Union had upstaged the feat. Bart felt the pain of having been beaten to the punch and losing the race to a manned space launch, but he was already looking ahead at future chances to fight back.

"There's the moon, Mars, Mercury... Space goes on for eternity, after all!"

Lev and Irina were around the same age as Bart, and it was inspiring to see them achieve such a momentous feat. Even to Bart's coworkers, they were heroes worthy of respect.

"That Irina is so cute."

"Yeah, but she's a pureblood Nosferatu. Kind of scary, no?"

Lev and Irina were all anyone had talked about the past few days. People were gabbing back and forth about all sorts of stuff. Bart wanted to meet Lev and Irina, but he was acutely aware of how bad he was at talking to people. He was also afraid that, even if he got the opportunity, he'd be so nervous he wouldn't be able to speak. Well, if *anyone* got the chance to meet them, it would be his famous brother, not some lowly new recruit. Still, Bart was an

imaginative sort, and he daydreamed of shaking hands with Lev.

“...and they say the government is looking into whether a moon landing is possible.”

The words cut into Bart’s reverie and made his heart jump. “Really?!”

“Yeah, all the higher-ups are making a hubbub about it. They’ll put a development team together so long as they get the budget, apparently. They’re actively recruiting the best and the brightest from all around, even dhampirs.”

“Dhampirs too...”

One reason the UK had been lagging behind at second place in the space race was that dhampirs had been expelled from its leading teams. However, with the Zirnitra Union publicly recognizing the achievements of vampire Irina Luminesk, ANSA had quickly pivoted its own stance on dhampirs to harmonious and friendly relations.

Bart had no bigoted feelings whatsoever toward the dhampir, but the town in which he lived was clearly segregated. Even within ANSA, facilities used by dhampirs were separate. Some of Bart’s coworkers couldn’t stand the sight of them, viewing them as an extension of the cursed species. But with relations slowly mending, and talented dhampir entering development teams, the UK was looking at a great leap in technological innovation.

“Great!” Bart exclaimed. “Let’s get to work putting people on the moon.”

However, Bart’s coworkers didn’t share his enthusiasm.

“Well, let’s just hope we can even keep working,” said one, pointing to the southern skies. “It’s dangerous, what with the failed airstrikes and ground strategies.”

The day after the Zirnitra Union’s victory celebration, the UK had tried to put down a revolutionary regime in a neighboring country by way of airstrikes. Even now, three days later, gunfire and missiles flew back and forth across the sea.

“Can’t we all just get along?” Bart muttered.

As soon as he spoke, his coworkers whipped their heads skyward. Just as quickly, they tripped over each other in a frantic attempt to run.

“Huh?”

Confused, Bart also looked at the sky. A bar-shaped object coated in flame was hurtling their way.

“Whaaat?!”

It's coming straight for me!

But Bart's reaction times were poor. He froze in place, unable to move.

Bang! The bar-shaped object collided with Bart's face, sending juice and hamburger flying everywhere.

“What the...?”

The crushed object was like a little missile, and its smoke trailed into the air.

“Sorry!” someone shouted.

Shocked as he was, Bart managed to turn toward the source of the voice. He found a silver-haired girl running over to him, her white lab coat streaming behind her.

She huffed and puffed to catch her breath. “Are you...okay? No...injuries?”

The girl's shoulders heaved with each gasp. She was of slender build, and her skin was white as snow. She looked a little older than Bart. He looked up at her face, and in his surprise, he forgot to breathe.

Scarlet eyes, pointed ears, and sharp teeth. The girl was a dhampir.

First the shock of having a missile fired at him, then the appearance of a dhampir. Bart's heart wouldn't stop racing.

“Oh no, your clothes... I'm so sorry...”

The girl's voice yanked him back to reality, and he looked at himself. He was covered in specks of food and drink.

The girl knelt next to him, looking at his dirty clothes regretfully. “I-I'll cover the expense...”

It was the first time Bart had ever been so close to a dhampir, let alone spoken to one. He could even smell her shampoo. Usually, Arnack's humans and

dhampirs kept away from each other. People like this girl, who ignored the wall between races, were decidedly rare.

She picked up the bar-shaped object tenderly. “Oh no, my Blue Angel... It’s broken...”

She must have been a researcher, based on her lab coat. She kneeled there, shoulders slumped, and Bart worked up the courage to talk to her.

“Wh-wha... Um, what was the experiment?” he asked.

“Hm?”

The dhampir girl looked suddenly bashful, her fangs flashing from her mouth. Perhaps she was happy to have someone show interest in her work.

“Well, it’s more like a hobby than an experiment. It’s a compact satellite. I made it myself.”

Bart didn’t know it at the time, but as the threat of nuclear war closed in, it was this girl—Kaye Scarlet—he would work with on the moon landing project.

AND WITH THAT, THE CHALLENGE CONTINUED...

Afterword

IN THIS AFTERWORD, I'm going to touch on the contents of this volume (I'll avoid spoilers), so it's probably best if you read this last.

As I mentioned in the afterword for the first volume, this story is based on historical events. I'd like to reveal here which parts are based on reality.

First, the call sign "Cedar" (based on the deodar cedar, or Himalayan cedar) is historically accurate. However, in all my research, I couldn't find out why they used that call sign, so the Chief's reasons for picking it are my own creation. Furthermore, all the call signs used after Cedar are birds, which makes Cedar even more mysterious. If anyone can shed light on the subject, I'm all ears!

On that note, the famous line "It is I, Seagull!" doesn't actually express the feeling of flight. Rather, it's more like a message: "This is Seagull. Come in." I can't help feeling that the words would never have become famous if they were "It is I, Cedar!" That just brings images of hay fever to mind...

Then there's the copper coin scene in the city square. I modeled it after places where tourists throw coins to wish for good fortune. However, it's unclear who started this and why it's good fortune people wish for. Considering all that, the concept of paying a fare is fictional. So, if you ever throw coins around sacred places and tell people you're paying your travel fares, they're going to be rightly confused.

Regarding Mars and space tours, that was something scholars at the time actually thought about. They were also terrified by the idea that an intelligent species on Mars had launched giant artificial satellites.

As a result of all this, the story of Irina is a mishmash of truth and fiction.

This book wouldn't have been possible without the help of so many. Tabata-sama, your guidance is always appreciated. It's like you're a nocturnal creature yourself, living in the new office building...

KAREI-sama, your cover illustration is so perfect for my background work music that I'm framing it.

And to all you readers, you have my thanks. Your support and sharing of the first book was the fuel powering this spaceship. I hope for your continued support.

By the way, do you know the song “Fly Me to the Moon”? You may know it as the ending theme to a particular anime, but it was a huge hit in the 60s when the Apollo Project began. It’s the first song humanity ever took to the moon. It’s fun to listen to the original version to feel that in it.

Until next time,

KEISUKE MAKINO

From the Author

Keisuke Makino In addition to light novels, I write for games and TV dramas. Recently, I worked on the writing team for *Persona 5*. I still haven't had a chance to try the blini I mentioned in the last volume...

Books by Keisuke Makino

Flick & Break

Flick & Break, Vol. 2

Flick & Break, Vol. 3

Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut

From the Artist

KAREI Lately, I've been having lots of dreams where I'm floating around in zero gravity. I guess my brain is telling me it feels kind of adrift.

Pixiv: 3410642 Twitter: @flat_fish_



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